

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/switching-from-scholar-to-entrepreneur>

In an interview with DFJ General Partner Steve Jurvetson, Elon Musk recalls how the rise of the Internet in the mid 1990s prompted him to switch from pursuing a Ph.D. to launching an online startup, based on his desire to produce something practical. Musk describes seeing the Internet as a "central nervous system" that was uniting humanity and turning it into "a super-organism."



Transcript

To go back to college times-- I was working on energy storage technologies for electric vehicles.. And that's what I was going to pursue at Stanford, actually, was work on advanced capacitors and batteries to improve the energy density for electric vehicles.. And then the internet was kind of happening.. It was clear the internet was happening back in '94, '95.. And I wasn't sure if what I worked on in the PhD would actually be useful.. So I was really concerned that if I-- Why, timing? Or what was your intuition? Meaning it could be academically useful, but not practically useful.. It could result in a PhD and adding some leaf to the tree of knowledge, but then discovering that, well, it's not really going to matter.. Is it going to be a good enough thing to actually be used in an electric vehicle? I wasn't sure.. I mean, I was uncertain as to whether success was one of the possible outcomes.. I thought maybe it was, but I wasn't sure..

And then I thought, well, if I watch the internet get built while I'm doing this, that would be really frustrating.. There's a sense of that eminent timing-- like that was the time for the internet.. And maybe the other stuff could wait or be on the back burner of your mind.. Was it always there, like one day I'll get back to that? Or was it-- Yeah, I thought probably I'd get back to it, and did end up doing that.. But I thought the internet was happening-- really taking off, although most people weren't aware of it in '95.. And so I figured electric vehicle technology, energy source technology-- there will be some sort of natural progression in that and I could come back to it later.. But the internet-- that was the moment to really do something.. Although in '95, it wasn't obvious that you could actually make any money on the internet.. Until Netscape went public, I think at the end of '95, nobody even thought you could make a valuable company on the internet.. It wasn't as obvious as it seems now..

Yeah, now it seems really obvious.. But back then, it was not at all.. So it was really from the perspective of-- it wasn't like, I want to make a bunch of money.. It was actually from I want to just be part of following this thing that I thought was like a nervous system.. It was like previously, people had communicated effectively by osmosis.. And you'd have to basically physically connect with somebody to really communicate-- like a letter.. You sent letters on paper.. And with the internet, anyone who had a connection anywhere in the world would have access to all the world's information, just like sort of a nervous system.. So humanity was effectively becoming a super-organism, and qualitatively different than what it had been before.. And so I wanted to be part of that..

But initially, the goal was just to make enough money to pay the rent.. It wasn't to do anything beyond that...