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CNBC Article Titled “Elon Musk found not liable in ‘pedo guy’
defamation trial”

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Elon Musk found not liable in 'pedo guy' defamation trial

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KEY POINTS

- Elon Musk was found not liable for defamation in a Los Angeles federal court on Friday.
- A British cave explorer, Vernon Unsworth, brought the suit against Musk in September 2018, after the Tesla and SpaceX CEO had called him "sus" (suspicious) and a "pedo guy" on Twitter.
- Musk and his defense team, led by attorney Alex Spiro, argued that "pedo guy" was simply heated rhetoric and not meant as a statement of fact.

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VIDEO 00:54
Musk wins defamation case

A jury decided that Elon Musk had not defamed British caver Vernon Unsworth in a Los Angeles federal court on Friday.

"My faith in humanity is restored," said Musk in court after the verdict was delivered. The jury deliberated for only an hour before delivering its verdict in the case, which went to trial earlier this week.

Unsworth brought the suit against Musk in September 2018, after the [Tesla](#) and SpaceX CEO had called him "sus" (suspicious) and a "pedo guy" on Twitter earlier that summer. Musk also characterized the spelunker as a "child rapist" in e-mails to BuzzFeed reporter Ryan Mac, and practically requested the lawsuit in August 2018 with a tweet that said, "Don't you think it's strange he hasn't sued me?"

In his testimony during the defamation trial this week, Musk apologized to Unsworth and said he did not believe the cave explorer was a pedophile.

Musk and his defense team, led by attorney Alex Spiro, argued that "pedo guy" was simply heated rhetoric and not meant as a statement of fact. They also argued that the phrase "pedo guy" is widely known as slang for "creepy old guy." And they suggested that Unsworth was looking for a payday in court, and had not sincerely been harmed by the "pedo guy" label.

The clash between the two men began when Unsworth criticized Musk for involving himself, and his employees, in an effort to rescue 12 boys and their soccer coach from flooded caves in Thailand in July 2018.

Unsworth's expertise and knowledge of the caves proved instrumental in extracting the soccer team. He is credited as being a leader of the rescue effort.

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Annotate Image

Musk and his employees developed a device that they billed as a mini-submarine or escape pod, and which they thought could transport the kids out of the caves. On July 8, 2018, Musk wrote in a tweet, “Mini-sub arriving in about 17 hours. Hopefully useful. If not, perhaps it will be in a future situation.” The device was never used in the effort, however.

Before the rescue was completed, Musk had directed employees to compel Thai officials to say nice things about him and his mini-sub, even as storms continued to bear down.

After the rescue, Unsworth was asked during a television interview on CNN about the mini-sub and Musk. He said Musk could “stick his submarine where it hurts,” and viewed the escape pod as “just a [PR stunt](#).”

Lashing back, Musk called the caver a “pedo guy” in his now infamous public tweets.

The verdict could set a precedent where free speech online, libel and slander are concerned. Vernon Unsworth vs. Elon Musk was one of the first major defamation lawsuits --brought by a private individual over a tweet-- to ever go to trial.

In closing arguments, Unsworth’s attorney, L. Lin Wood, made an emotional appeal to the jury, calling Musk a “liar” while standing just a few feet away from the CEO. He also referred to Musk as “the billionaire bully,” and said that by labeling Unsworth a “pedo guy” on Twitter, where Musk had tens of millions of followers, “He dropped a nuclear bomb on Vernon Unsworth,” and the fallout would last for decades.

Wood, who is well-known for representing Richard Jewell in his defamation case (and who will be portrayed by Sam Rockwell in an upcoming film about that) sought damages of \$190 million in total for Unsworth. That included: \$5 million in actual damages, \$35 million in assumed damages and punitive damages of \$150 million. That amounts to less than a percent of Elon Musk’s [estimated net worth](#) including approximately \$20 billion in SpaceX and Tesla holdings.

Musk’s lead attorney, Alex Spiro, in closing arguments characterized Musk’s offensive tweets as merely insulting and not statements of fact. Spiro also said that Unsworth was telling the court, “I’ve been horribly damaged. Pay me lots of money,” but then failed to prove he had been damaged at all. Referencing the fact that Unsworth had earned a little money for speaking engagements since the cave rescue, he asked, “You wanna award damages? How about one dollar?” And he implored the court not to engage in policing speech.

-- CNBC correspondents [Jane Wells](#) and Paul McNamara contributed to this report.

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