

What does Elon Musk's Twitter takeover mean for American democracy?

By: Shruthi Vasudevan



February 10, 2023

Why is Elon Musk's involvement crucial?

Musk has been forthcoming about his plans for the company, telling investors about his goal to cut down almost 75% of Twitter's workforce, a mass layoff that disproportionately affected Twitter's public policy team. The team's role is to collaborate with Twitter's Trust and Safety council- also disbanded early into Musk's tenure- to protect users who use Twitter as a platform for activism, ensures compliance with government and global regulations, moderates sensitive content, and upholds transparency. Cuts to the public policy team pose an imminent threat to all users, who are now vulnerable to privacy breaches, exposure to harmful and regulation-violating content, and disinformation. When juxtaposed with Musk's assurance to advertisers that Twitter will not become a "free for all hellscape, where anything can be said with no consequences," or that the platform will be "warm and welcoming to all, where you can choose your desired experience," is called into question, in light of his decision to erode away the teams that maintain the aforementioned user experience.

Additionally, Musk's ownership of Twitter must be taken in the context of his other business interests. He has strategically avoided providing a statement on how Twitter will navigate its relationship with states notorious for disinformation efforts and social media censorship- namely Russia and China, both of which Musk has business ties with through Tesla. These conflicting interests may likely confound Musk's judgment when cracking down on foreign-sourced falsehoods and propaganda campaigns.

What are the implications of oligarchs controlling the news media?

Billionaires broadening their reach to control the news media is hardly a novel development pioneered by Musk. Former President Donald Trump tried his hand at popularizing Truth Social, a platform that he claimed would bring to light the truth "hidden" by progressives and a corrupt elite. With considerably more success, business magnate Rupert Murdoch currently controls the Fox networks, and Musk's fellow Silicon Valley mogul Jeff Bezos owns the Washington Post, which he bought for 250 million dollars in 2013.

In light of these new commanders of America's news media, a study from almost a decade ago at Princeton University about the omnipresent threat of American oligarchy looms into focus. The study warned that even then, the US was beginning to see a shift away from the democratic republic structure that had defined the nation's politics for so long and into an oligarchy, a dangerous system where a small group of wealthy individuals exert disproportionate political power. And in this age, there is no greater political power than control over the digital public square.

Much of the dialogue over Elon Musk's Twitter takeover circles around his ever-fluctuating approach to defeating "wokeness", or the eccentric personality that he made headlines with even when his brand was solely linked with the Tesla brand. But this framing ignores a more alarming trend, one of technology elites' increasing influence over the discourse that happens on citizen-led platforms. And when these figures, who already enjoy a degree of unaccountability afforded by their wealth, determine the limits of free speech on platforms that they own, the trends in discourse begin to change. Counterintuitively to Musk's stated goal of addressing free speech concerns with Twitter, he has already begun using his newfound power to remove tweets and accounts that publicly disagree with his decisions, call for accountability, and critique his leadership.

The unignorable indicator of a crisis has already flashed: citizens growing concerned with voicing their opinions on a public forum, driven by the fear of having their accounts taken down by the platform's petulant owner- not a standardized code of conduct. The subsequent shift in tweets visible to the average user when taken on a mass scale, eventually will reshape public opinion in favor of the agenda that Musk and other oligarchs set.

Is Twitter's neutrality in danger?

Musk bought over the platform when Twitter's algorithm was already beginning to show signs of a partisan slant. University of Pennsylvania researcher Sandra González-Bailón and colleagues from the University of Padua and the Fondazione Bruno Kessler (FBK) in Italy and the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill found that Twitter gives greater visibility to conservatively framed news than it does to stories with a liberal slant, a revelation that rather being corrected, seems to be amplified by Musk, who uses his personal account to promotes partisan stories that agree with him and his mission.

Musk took to Twitter ahead of the 2022 midterms to influence independent voters on the platform to vote for Republican candidates to offset the power of a Democratic presidency. Musk has been vocal about his stance that Twitter previously had a "strong liberal bias," Yet as the new owner as the platform, Musk's strategic use of his personal account as a pulpit to shape voter behavior signals a departure from his previous claims that Twitter as a platform must be "politically neutral" in order to maintain public trust. Critics have responded to Musk's endorsement, calling into question the appropriateness of a figure with such public notoriety and power attempting to sway election results on the platform he owns.

What does this mean for journalism and academia?

One of the main ways Twitter affects journalists and researchers has to do with Musk's recent decision to put the site's API behind a paywall. Twitter defines their API as a "set of programmatic endpoints" that users can utilize to "retrieve or engage with tweets, users, spaces, direct messages, lists, trends," and more. In short, the Twitter API allows users to obtain broad data collected across the platform, and until early February was free for users to access.

The data retrieved from APIs was crucial to those who studied and reported on data collected from Twitter, who then made their research available for public access. This afforded users a degree of third-party transparency that is now in jeopardy.

In response to this decision, The Coalition for Independent Technology Research has written a joint letter advocating for continued free access, citing the threats to public-interest research and interruption to thousands of projects that are undertaken by programs and reporters that are not independently funded. The letter has been signed by “92 organizations, including Demos, the Data & Society Research Institute, Center for Democracy & Technology, Digital Rights Foundation and Hope not Hate.”

Musk has also gained a reputation for banning the accounts of several high-profile technology journalists that have raised skepticism over his tenure over the company. In the wake of this self-serving user policing, several journalists have begun a migration to Mastodon, another social media network that has seen a steady increase in users since Musk’s takeover in October. Even presently, many journalists have begun to preface tweets that contain profiles of Musk or Twitter that are less than glowing praises with reminders to follow them on Mastodon if their Twitter accounts are taken down.

As we approach another election year, what might be at stake?

Musk’s Twitter takeover came at a precarious time right before the 2022 midterm elections, and one new feature in particular posed dangerous implications for voter education. Musk rolled out a paid verification subscription in early November that allowed any user to pay \$8 to receive the site’s characteristic “check mark” next to their name. In the past, this verification symbol was a way to distinguish verified prominent users amongst parody accounts. Though this system differentiated new Twitter Blue subscribers’ check marks from legacy verified users via the color of the check mark, Musk provided no plans for confirming if subscribers were indeed who they claimed to be in their Twitter moniker before giving them verification. This opens up the possibility for impersonation, especially of politicians, journalists, and activists who Tweet information about the election process, voting deadlines, or candidates. Twitter has already seen users purchase a Twitter Blue subscription to impersonate figures including Ben Shapiro, Rudy Giuliani, and Senator Ed Markey. As social media slowly begins to replace mainstream news networks as a source of political information for average Americans, it is imperative that voters receive accurate information about candidate positions and election details from authentic sources.

Because Musk's layoffs prominently affected those who work closely on preventing misinformation and contextualizing news headlines, there is already widespread concern within the company whether these calculated changes will lead to an increase in falsehoods on the platform. The 2020 election and its aftermath proved to us just how inextricable falsehoods have become from American democracy—myths and conspiracies that centered around a “stolen election” proliferated on Twitter, necessitating previous leadership to flag tweets that included false information about election results. But if Musk fires personnel that work on moderating content that may be misleading and harmful, while loosening regulations that prevent users from impersonating political and journalistic figures, he opens up the potential for many users being exposed to political information that ranges from exaggerated figures and quotes, to deliberate disinformation and deep fakes.

What can the government do to limit exposure to political disinformation, false news, and hate speech.

The only way that the government can actually prevent users from viewing this type of harmful content would be to assume the role of a content regulator on Twitter. However, two major legal precedents stand in the way of this.

First is Section 230 of the Federal Communications Decency Act, which grants companies immunity from content posted on their platforms as long as it was created and disseminated by users. Unfortunately, Congress does not wield the power necessary to eliminate or even amend section 230.

Second is the First Amendment, which protects users on Twitter who impersonate high profile public health officials, politicians, or journalists, or those who spread misinformation— whether intentionally or unintentionally. This includes Musk himself, who is legally free to tweet political propaganda and publicly condemn users he disagrees with. Additionally, the First Amendment also applies to Twitter as a company, since general falsehoods are not covered as an exception to free speech in the same way that obscenity or inciting violence could.

This means that the onus to remain vigilant about ethical media consumption falls on Twitter users. It is now more than ever, the average digi-citizens who must be responsible in verifying potentially misleading news stories, verifying that sources are who they claim to be, and exercising caution towards bias in a platform that goes far beyond t

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