

As Musk buyout looms, Twitter searches for its soul

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The Twitter application is seen on a digital device, Monday, April 25, 2022, in San Diego. A toxic cesspool. A lifeline. A finger on the world's pulse. Twitter is all these things and more to its over 217 million users around the world — politicians, journalists, activists, celebrities, weirdos and normies, cat and dog lovers and just about anyone else with an internet connection. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

A toxic cesspool. A lifeline. A finger on the world's pulse. Twitter is all these things and more to its over 229 million users around the world—politicians, journalists, activists, celebrities, weirdos and normies, cat and dog lovers and just about anyone else with an internet connection.

For Elon Musk, its ultimate troll and perhaps most prolific user whose buyout of the company is [on increasingly shaky ground](#), Twitter is a "de facto town square" in dire need of a libertarian makeover.

Whether and how the takeover will happen, at this stage in the game, is anyone's guess. On Friday, Musk announced that the deal is "on hold," then tweeted that he was still "committed" to it. On Tuesday, the billionaire Tesla CEO said he'd reverse the platform's [ban of former President Donald Trump](#) if his purchase goes through but also voiced support for a new European Union law aimed at protecting [social media users](#) from harmful content. Twitter's current CEO, meanwhile, [fired two top managers](#) on Thursday.

It's been a messy few weeks and only one thing seems sure: the turmoil will continue for Twitter, inside and outside of the company.

"Twitter at its highest levels has always been chaos. It has always had intrigue and it has always had drama," says Leslie Miley, a former Twitter engineering manager. "This," he says, "is in Twitter's DNA."

'WHAT PEOPLE ARE THINKING ABOUT'

From its 2007 debut as a scrappy "microblogging service" at the South by Southwest Festival in Austin, Texas, Twitter has always punched above its weight.

At a time when its rivals count their users by the billions, it has stayed

small, frustrating Wall Street and making it easier for Musk to swoop in with an offer its board could not refuse.

But Twitter also wields unrivaled influence on news, politics and society thanks to its public nature, its simple, largely text-based interface and its sense of chronological immediacy.

"It's a potluck of pithy self-expression simmering with whimsy, narcissism, voyeurism, hucksterism, tedium and sometimes useful information," Associated Press technology writer Michael Liedtke wrote in a [2009 story](#) about the company a few months after it rejected a \$500 million buyout from Facebook. Twitter had 27 employees at the time, and its most popular user was Barack Obama.

Today, the San Francisco icon employs 7,500 people around the world. Obama is still its most popular account holder, followed by pop stars Justin Bieber and Katy Perry (Musk is No. 6). Twitter's rise to the mainstream can be chronicled through world events, as wars, terror attacks, the Arab Spring, the #metoo movement and other pivotal moments in our collective history played out in real time on the platform.

"Twitter often attracts thinkers. People who are thinking about things tend to be attracted to a text-based platform. And it's full of journalists. So Twitter is both a reflection of and a driver of what people are thinking about," says writer, editor and OnlyFans creator Cathy Reisenwitz, who's been on Twitter since 2010 and has over 18,000 followers.

These days, Reisenwitz tweets about politics, sex work, housing and land use issues among many other things. She finds it great for discovering people and ideas and having others discover her writing and thoughts. That's why she's stayed all these years, despite harassment and even

death threats she's received on the platform.

Twitter users in academia, in niche fields, those with quirky interests, subcultures small and big, grassroots activists, researchers and a host of others flock to the platform. Why? Because at its best, it promises an open, free exchange of facts and ideas, where knowledge is shared, debated and questioned. Journalists, Reisenwitz recalled, were among the first to really take on Twitter en masse and make it what it is today.

"If I'm on Twitter, (almost) any journalist, no matter how big their platform was, if you said something interesting would respond to you and you could have a conversation about what they'd written and pretty real time," Reisenwitz says. "And I just thought, this is amazing. Just whatever field you're in, you can talk to the experts and ask them questions."

And those subcultures—they're formidable. There's Black Twitter, feminist Twitter, baseball Twitter, Japanese cat Twitter, ER nurse Twitter and so on.

"It's enabled [interest groups](#), especially those that are organized around [social identity](#), whether we're talking about gender or sexuality or race, to have really important in-group dialogues," says Brooke Erin Duffy, a professor at Cornell University who studies social media.

In a [2018 study on social media subcultures](#)—Black Twitter, Asian American Twitter and feminist Twitter—the Knight Foundation found that they not only helped challenge top-down, sometimes problematic views of the communities but also influence wider media coverage on important issues.

"So there's this really interesting flow of information that's not just top-down, mainstream media communicating to subcultures, but allowing

various groups, in this case Black Twitter, to have really important, impactful conversations that the media took up and got disseminated to the wider public," Duffy says.



CEO Elon Musk departs from the justice center in Wilmington, Del., Tuesday, July 13, 2021. Musk says his planned \$44 billion purchase of Twitter is "temporarily on hold" pending details on spam and fake accounts on the social media platform. The announcement that the Tesla billionaire tweeted Friday, May 13, 2022 is another twist amid signs of internal turmoil over his planned buyout of Twitter. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File

Software engineer Cher Scarlett says that while Twitter is far from perfect—and, undeniably, home to harassment, [hate speech](#) and

misinformation—it's still a step above many platforms. That's because Twitter has at least tried to address toxic content, she says, with improvements like Twitter Safety Mode, a product now being tested that would make it easier for users to stop harassment. Scarlett has faced repeated online abuse for her advocacy for women in the tech field.

"I've been on Twitter since it started. A big part of my network is Twitter," Scarlett says. "There is nothing else really like it."

THE DARK SIDE

On the flip side of Twitter's immediacy, public, open nature and 280-character (once 140-character) limit is a perfect recipe for passions to run high—especially anger.

"When dealing with fans, emotions can get boiling, especially if you are sharing anything negative about their teams," says Steve Phillips, a former general manager of the New York Mets who now hosts a show on MLB Network Radio. "The anonymity of Twitter empowers people to take shots sometimes, but it is till one of the most effective ways to communicate with people with similar interests."

But it's not all baseball Twitter out there. There's also the massive, scary, dark part of Twitter. This is the Twitter of Nazis, of demented trolls, of conspiracy theorists and of nation states funding massive networks to influence elections.

Jaime Longoria, manager of research and training for the Disinfo Defense League, a nonprofit which works with community organizations to fight misinformation, says Musk's purchase of Twitter jeopardizes a platform that many experts believe has done a better job of [reining in harmful content](#) than its competitors.

He worries Musk will relax moderation rules that offered some protection against white supremacy, hate speech, threats of violence and harassment. He says he hopes he is wrong. "We're watching and waiting," Longoria says. "The Twitter we know may be over. I think Twitter as we have known it will cease to exist."

In a series of tweets in 2018, then-CEO Jack Dorsey said the company was committed to "collective health, openness, and civility of public conversation, and to hold ourselves publicly accountable towards progress."

"We have witnessed abuse, harassment, troll armies, manipulation through bots and human-coordination, misinformation campaigns, and increasingly divisive echo chambers. We aren't proud of how people have taken advantage of our service, or our inability to address it fast enough," he wrote.

Twitter, led by its trust and safety team, has worked to improve things. It enacted new policies, added labels to false information, kicked off repeated violators of its rules against hate, inciting violence and other harmful activities.

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, [social media](#) companies have gone through a reckoning over how Russia used their platforms to influence U.S. politics. In fits and starts, things have started to improve, at least in the United States and Western Europe.

At its best, Twitter connects people across the world to participate in the open exchange of ideas. Musk told The Associated Press recently that he wants Twitter to be "inclusive" and "where ideally most of America is on it and talking." But this does not take into account the fact that most of Twitter's user base is outside of the United States—and that Twitter looks very different in the rest of the world, where American party-line

divisions and free speech arguments make little sense.

Outside Western democracies, for instance, users say not much has changed when it comes to clamping down on hate and misinformation.

"There's a lot of hate on Twitter, especially directed at minorities. And so there's always a constant battle to get Twitter to clamp down on hate speech, very often violent hate speech and fake news. And yeah, I think Twitter really does not really do enough for that," says Shoaib Daniyal, associate editor with the Indian news website Scroll.

"Twitter is almost like a central node, which feeds political activity out into TV channels and to journalists and WhatsApp groups."

Musk's free speech absolutism, Daniyal says, doesn't make much sense in India because there have not been many curbs on speech on the platform to begin with.

"It's fairly filled with hate anyway," he says. "And Twitter hasn't done a lot about it. So let's see where it goes." Which, given Musk's mercurial nature, could be almost any direction at all.

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