

Mass migration from Twitter is likely to be an uphill battle—just ask ex-Tumblr users

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[Elon Musk announced that "the bird is freed"](#) when his US\$44 billion acquisition of Twitter officially closed on Oct. 27, 2022. Some users on the microblogging platform saw this as a reason to fly away.

Over the course of the next 48 hours, I saw countless announcements on my Twitter feed from people either leaving the platform or making

preparations to leave. The hashtags #GoodbyeTwitter, #TwitterMigration and #Mastodon [were trending](#). The decentralized, [open source](#) social network Mastodon gained over 100,000 users in just a few days, according to a [user counting bot](#).

As an information scientist who [studies online communities](#), this felt like the beginning of something I've seen before. Social media platforms tend not to last forever. Depending on your age and online habits, there's probably some platform that you miss, even if it still exists in some form. Think of MySpace, LiveJournal, Google+ and Vine.

When [social media platforms](#) fall, sometimes the [online communities](#) that made their homes there fade away, and sometimes they pack their bags and relocate to a new home. The turmoil at Twitter is causing many of the company's users to consider leaving the platform. Research on previous social media platform migrations shows what might lie ahead for Twitter users who fly the coop.

Several years ago, I led [a research project](#) with Brianna Dym, now at University of Maine, where we mapped the platform migrations of nearly 2,000 people over a period of almost two decades. The community we examined was [transformative fandom](#), fans of literary and popular culture series and franchises who create art using those characters and settings.

We chose it because it is a large community that has thrived in a number of different online spaces. Some of the same people writing Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan fiction on Usenet in the 1990s were writing Harry Potter fan fiction on LiveJournal in the 2000s and Star Wars fan fiction on Tumblr in the 2010s.

By asking participants about their experiences moving across these platforms—why they left, why they joined and the challenges they faced

in doing so—we gained insights into factors that might drive the success and failure of platforms, as well as what [negative consequences](#) are likely to occur for a community when it relocates.

'You go first'

Regardless of how many people ultimately decide to leave Twitter, and even how many people do so around the same time, creating a community on another platform is an uphill battle. These migrations are in large part driven by network effects, meaning that the value of a new platform depends on who else is there.

In the critical early stages of migration, people have to coordinate with each other to encourage contribution on the new platform, which is really hard to do. It essentially becomes, as one of our participants described it, a "game of chicken" where no one wants to leave until their friends leave, and no one wants to be first for fear of being left alone in a new place.

For this reason, the "death" of a platform—whether from a controversy, disliked change or competition—tends to be a slow, gradual process. One participant described Usenet's decline as "like watching a shopping mall slowly go out of business."

It'll never be the same

The current push from some corners to leave Twitter reminded me a bit of [Tumblr's adult content ban](#) in 2018, which reminded me of LiveJournal's policy changes and new ownership in 2007. People who left LiveJournal in favor of other platforms like Tumblr described feeling unwelcome there. And though Musk did not walk into Twitter headquarters at the end of October and turn a virtual content moderation

lever into the "off" position, there was [an uptick in hate speech on the platform](#) as some users felt emboldened to violate the platform's content policies under an assumption that major policy changes were on the way.

So what might actually happen if a lot of Twitter users do decide to leave? What makes Twitter Twitter isn't the technology, it's the particular configuration of interactions that takes place there. And there is essentially zero chance that Twitter, as it exists now, could be reconstituted on another platform. Any migration is likely to face many of the challenges previous platform migrations have faced: content loss, fragmented communities, broken social networks and shifted community norms.

But Twitter isn't one community, it's a collection of many communities, each with its own norms and motivations. Some communities might be able to migrate more successfully than others. So maybe K-Pop Twitter could coordinate a move to Tumblr. I've seen much of Academic Twitter coordinating a move to Mastodon. Other communities might already simultaneously exist on Discord servers and subreddits, and can just let participation on Twitter fade away as fewer people pay attention to it. But as our study implies, migrations always have a cost, and even for smaller communities, some people will get lost along the way.

For anyone wondering, Mastodon got over 70K sign-ups yesterday alone. Let's keep the momentum going! The "public square" of the web must not belong to any one person or corporation!

— Mastodon (@joinmastodon) [October 30, 2022](#)

The ties that bind

Our research also pointed to design recommendations for supporting

migration and how one platform might take advantage of attrition from another platform. Cross-posting features can be important because many people hedge their bets. They might be unwilling to completely cut ties all at once, but they might dip their toes into a new platform by sharing the same content on both.

Ways to import networks from another platform also help to maintain communities. For example, there are [multiple ways to](#) find people you follow on Twitter on Mastodon. Even simple welcome messages, guides for newcomers and easy ways to find other migrants could make a difference in helping resettlement attempts stick.

And through all of this, it's important to remember that this is such a hard problem by design. Platforms have no incentive to help users leave. As long-time technology journalist Cory Doctorow recently wrote, [this is "a hostage situation."](#) Social media lures people in with their friends, and then the threat of losing those social networks keeps people on the platforms.

But even if there is a price to pay for leaving a platform, communities can be incredibly resilient. Like the LiveJournal users in our study who found each other again on Tumblr, your fate is not tied to Twitter's.

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