

Journalist suspensions widen rift between Twitter and media

December 18 2022, by MAE ANDERSON and MATT O'BRIEN



Tesla and SpaceX Chief Executive Officer Elon Musk speaks at the SATELLITE Conference and Exhibition in Washington, Monday, March 9, 2020. Twitter on Thursday, Dec. 16, 2022 suspended the accounts of journalists who cover the social media platform and its new owner Elon Musk, among them reporters working for The New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, Voice of America and other publications. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File

Elon Musk's abrupt suspension of several journalists who cover Twitter widens a growing rift between the social media site and media organizations that have used the platform to build their audiences.

Individual reporters with The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, Voice of America and other news agencies saw their accounts go dark Thursday.

Musk tweeted late Friday that the company would lift the suspensions following the results of a public poll on the site. The poll showed 58.7% of respondents favored a move to immediately unsuspend accounts over 41.3% who said the suspensions should be lifted in seven days.

The company has not explained why the accounts were taken down. But Musk took to Twitter on Thursday night to accuse journalists of sharing private information about his whereabouts, which he described as "basically assassination coordinates." He provided no evidence for that claim.

Many advertisers abandoned Twitter over content moderation questions after Musk acquired it in October, and he now risks a rupture with media organizations, which are among the most active on the platform.

Most of the accounts were back early Saturday, with some exceptions and at least one new suspension.

Washington Post reporter Taylor Lorenz confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that her Twitter [account](#) was suspended Saturday evening. Her online newsletter published on Substack said she was working on a story involving Musk and had sought comment from him through a Twitter post shortly before her account was suspended.

Business Insider's Linette Lopez was suspended Friday, also with no

explanation, she told The Associated Press. Lopez published a series of articles between 2018 and 2021 highlighting what she called dangerous Tesla manufacturing shortcomings.

Shortly before being suspended, she said she had posted court-related documents to Twitter that included a 2018 Musk email address. That address is not current, Lopez said, because "he changes his email every few weeks."

On Tuesday, she posted a 2019 story about Tesla troubles, commenting, "Now, just like then, most of @elonmusk's wounds are self inflicted."

The same day, she cited reports that Musk was reneging on severance for laid-off Twitter employees, threatening workers who talk to the media and refusing to make rent payments. Lopez described his actions as "classic Elon-going-for-broke behavior."

Steve Herman, a national correspondent for Voice of America, told The Associated Press that his suspended Twitter account still hadn't been fully restored as of Saturday afternoon because of his refusal to delete three tweets that the company flagged for purportedly sharing Musk's whereabouts. Although [Herman's Twitter timeline](#) is now visible to most users, he said he can't see it himself nor can he post anything new until he removes the tweets that the company contends violate its revised terms of service.

"I am in a new level of purgatory," Herman said. "I do not believe anything I have tweeted violated any reasonable standard of any social media platform."

Alarm over the suspensions extended beyond media circles to the United Nations, which was reconsidering its involvement in Twitter.

The move sets "a dangerous precedent at a time when journalists all over the world are facing censorship, physical threats and even worse," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

The reporters' suspensions followed Musk's decision Wednesday [to permanently ban an account](#) that automatically tracked the flights of his private jet using publicly available data. That also led Twitter to change its rules for all users to prohibit the sharing of another person's current location without their consent.

Several of the reporters suspended Thursday night had been writing about the new policy and Musk's rationale for imposing it, which involved his allegations about a stalking incident he said affected his family Tuesday night in Los Angeles.

The official Twitter account for Mastodon, a decentralized alternative social network where many Twitter users are fleeing, was also banned. The reason was unclear, though it had tweeted about the jet-tracking account. Twitter also began preventing users from posting links to Mastodon accounts, in some cases flagging them as potential malware.

"This is of course a bald-faced lie," cybersecurity journalist Brian Krebs posted.

Explaining the reporter bans, Musk tweeted, "Same doxxing rules apply to 'journalists' as to everyone else."

He later added: "Criticizing me all day long is totally fine, but doxxing my real-time location and endangering my family is not."

" [Doxxing](#) " refers to disclosing someone's identity, address, [phone number](#) or other personal details that violate their privacy and could bring harm.

The Washington Post's executive editor, Sally Buzbee, said technology reporter Drew Harwell "was banished without warning, process or explanation" following the publication of accurate reporting about Musk.

CNN said in a statement that "the impulsive and unjustified suspension of a number of reporters, including CNN's Donie O'Sullivan, is concerning but not surprising."

"Twitter's increasing instability and volatility should be of incredible concern for everyone who uses Twitter," the statement added.

Another suspended journalist, Matt Binder of the technology news outlet Mashable, said he was banned Thursday night immediately after sharing a screenshot that O'Sullivan had posted before his own suspension.

The screenshot showed a statement from the Los Angeles Police Department sent earlier Thursday to multiple media outlets, including the AP, about how it was in touch with Musk's representatives about the alleged stalking incident.

Binder said he did not share any location data or any links to the jet-tracking account or other location-tracking accounts.

"I have been highly critical of Musk but never broke any of Twitter's listed policies," Binder said in an email.

The suspensions come as Musk makes [major changes to content moderation on Twitter](#). He has tried, through the release of selected company documents dubbed "[The Twitter Files](#)," to claim the platform suppressed right-wing voices under its previous leaders.

He has promised to let free speech reign and has reinstated high-profile accounts that previously broke Twitter's rules against hateful conduct or

harmful misinformation. He has also said he would suppress negativity and hate by depriving some accounts of "freedom of reach."

Opinion columnist Bari Weiss, who tweeted out some of "The Twitter Files," called for the suspended journalists to be reinstated.

"The old regime at Twitter governed by its own whims and biases and it sure looks like the new regime has the same problem," she tweeted "I oppose it in both cases."

If the suspensions lead to the exodus of media organizations that are highly active on Twitter, the platform would be changed at the fundamental level, said Lou Paskalis, longtime marketing and media executive and former Bank of America head of global media.

CBS briefly shut down its activity on Twitter in November due to "uncertainty" about new management, but [media organizations](#) have largely remained on the platform.

"We all know news breaks on Twitter ... and to now go after journalists really saws at the main foundational tent pole of Twitter," Paskalis said. "Driving journalists off Twitter is the biggest self-inflicted wound I can think of."

The suspensions may be the biggest red flag yet for advertisers, Paskalis said, some of which had already cut their spending on Twitter over uncertainty about the direction Musk is taking the platform.

"It is an overt demonstration of what advertisers fear the most—retribution for an action that Elon doesn't agree with," he added.

On Thursday night, Twitter's Spaces conference chat went down shortly after Musk abruptly signed out of a session hosted by a journalist during

which he had been questioned about the reporters' ousting. Musk later tweeted that Spaces had been taken offline [to deal with a "Legacy bug."](#) Late Friday, Spaces returned.

Advertisers are also monitoring the potential loss of Twitter users. Twitter is projected to lose 32 million users over the next two years, according to a forecast by Insider Intelligence, which cited technical issues and the return of accounts banned for offensive posts.

Meanwhile, some [Twitter alternatives](#) are gaining momentum.

Mastodon on Friday had more than 6 million users, nearly double the 3.4 million it had on the day Musk took ownership of Twitter. On many of the thousands of confederated networks in the open-source Mastodon platform, administrators and users solicited donations as disaffected Twitter users strained computing resources. Many of the networks, known as "instances," are crowd-funded. The platform is designed to be ad-free.

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