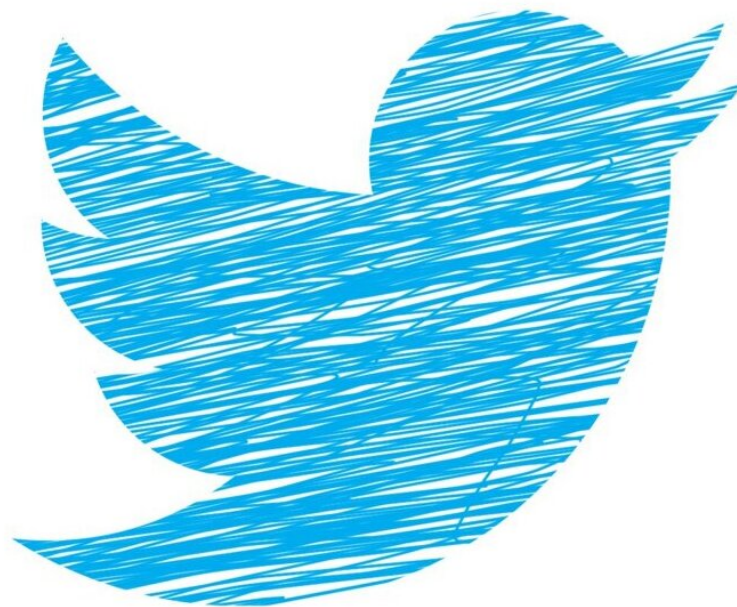


Can Threads replace Twitter as Washington's political watercooler?

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A week after Meta launched Threads, a Twitter doppelgänger disguised as Instagram-but-for-text, Washington's professional posters are watching it closely, curious to see whether it will knit together a viable

online community or soon unravel like so many other hopes to replace the original microblogging platform.

This isn't the first time Capitol Hill's extremely online set wondered whether a new app might usurp Twitter as their time suck of choice. In the wake of Elon Musk buying Twitter and promptly firing the majority of its workforce last year, Washington looked at alternatives like Mastodon and Post. But even as Twitter slowly burns—the platform has been riddled with bugs, bots and Bitcoin bros since Musk took over—those apps have been flashes in the pan, with numbers of users fizzling out after a burst of growth.

When CQ Roll Call asked communications and digital staffers back in December if they thought Twitter might be dethroned as Washington's digital watercooler of choice, they were rightly skeptical. "Twitter isn't going anywhere," said one aide.

But that was before the world's largest social media company entered the picture. As Twitter toyed around with limiting the number of tweets users could view, Threads reported more than 100 million sign-ups in its first week, including some of the biggest names in politics and journalism. So is Washington finally ready to leave its abusive, addiction-enabling relationship with Twitter and cozy up with Threads instead?

Not quite. Republican and Democratic aides alike said they got their bosses on Threads just in case it takes off, not because they really expect it to, with some adding that they were cross-posting tweets on the new app. "We planted a flag so that if things go a certain way, we're there," said Ben Kamens, communications director for Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio.

Despite Threads' record-setting debut, academic experts similarly questioned whether it could unseat Twitter.

"I'm the perpetual pessimist," said Annelise Russell, a professor of public policy at the University of Kentucky who studies how politicians use social media. "Google Plus showed us that just because you start with an advantage doesn't mean you're going to end up winning the day."

Guys. It's time for some game theory

The question of whether a social media network will succeed is a classic collective action problem: I'll use it if you use it, and you'll use it if I use it, but if you're not using it, then I'm not using it, and if I'm not using it, you're not using it either.

By effectively importing Instagram users, and automatically giving them the built-in network of who they follow on there, Threads seeks to avoid that dilemma. (Although, as Russell and a few Hill aides noted, that network of mostly friends and family isn't the same as the one they curated on Twitter; you may love your nana but hate her hot takes on politics.)

Threads' success will depend not just on the quantity of users but their quality, Russell said. Twitter's "special sauce" was gathering together newsmakers, news breakers and news junkies.

"The question I always ask is: Where are journalists going and where are congressional staff going?" Russell said.

So far, they're mostly visiting Threads without abandoning Twitter. Many journalists with a large social media presence are experimenting with Threads, like The New York Times' Maggie Haberman and CNN's Jake Tapper, as are lesser-known reporters who can't even get their spouses to follow them. Members of Congress have similarly started playing around on the platform, and a few have already amassed plenty of followers: Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., had 1 million as

of Thursday, and Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, had 68,600.

While AOC has been a fairly active Thread-er, Crenshaw hasn't yet made a single post, reflecting a partisan divide in the longing for a viable Twitter replacement.

"Twitter is continuing to get worse," said Daniel Schuman, policy director at left-leaning advocacy group Demand Progress, citing the influx of white supremacists and other right-wing reactionaries on the site since Musk defanged Twitter's censorship policies. "People really are looking for alternatives."

"After we see this blatant mismanagement and the increased promotion of hate and xenophobia on Twitter, it's not surprising that Congress and its staff associations are fleeing to other platforms," said Michael Suchecki, creative director for the Democratic Digital Communications Staff Association and aide to Massachusetts Rep. Seth Moulton.

"Threads is a place where we are ... able to engage certain constituents or communities better than Twitter, which is just a hate-for-profit institution at this point."

While GOP aides say some of the changes to Twitter have been bad, like the tweet limits and an increased number of spam bots, they mostly think it's going fine, applauding updates like the new community notes feature, which allows users to collectively append context to arguably misleading tweets.

"Notwithstanding the issue with the tweet limitations that popped up in the last few days, I have not gotten the sense that [Republicans] have been looking for alternatives," said a House GOP staffer who asked not to be named because he wasn't authorized to speak to the press.

"Among conservatives, there's a lot of concern that Threads will be

overly an overly curated place," he added, echoing Republican complaints that pre-Musk Twitter's censorship practices were biased against conservatives.

Still, if it takes off, Republicans like him will go where the audience is. "If there's a massive move over to it, I think we would probably follow," he said.

Despite their desire to leave Musk's Twitter, liberals aren't exactly thrilled to join Mark Zuckerberg's newest app. "It doesn't come down to Mark Zuckerberg being some careful, inspiring visionary—his platform helped perpetuate genocides around the world," said Suchecki.

When will we know if Threads has garroted Twitter? Russell says she'll keep an eye out for politicians responding to breaking news on Threads first as a sign of its ascendancy, alongside Hill reporters posting snippets of hallway gaggles there before, or in lieu of, tweeting them. For Kamens, "it's really a matter of when does Twitter become MySpace: When does it become the place where everyone used to be but no one is anymore?"

Some Democratic aides said they hoped Bluesky Social would take off, saying its functionality surpasses the other would-be Twitter replacements. The app started allowing some users to join by invite in February but remains in beta testing with only 300,000 total users. That delay may prove costly now that Threads has launched. "Did they miss their moment?" Schuman wondered.

The biggest gripe with Threads so far among the Capitol's professional posters is the lack of a desktop version of the app, "which makes it really difficult to manage for people that are already managing three or four other accounts," said Kamens.

Meta executives have said that desktop access is coming, along with an option to limit your feed to just people you follow, a real search function and other features conspicuously absent at its launch. Those would presumably make the app more useful for the news sharing and networking purposes that made Twitter integral to Washington insiders.

But it's not fully clear just how much Meta wants Threads to replace Twitter as Capitol Hill's virtual town hall.

It's rude to talk politics at the Threads table

When Alex Heath, an editor at The Verge, posted a Thread saying the app would need journalists to embrace it "to be a real Twitter competitor" and wondering if Meta was ready to do that given their recent moves away from news on its other platforms, Adam Mosseri, a Meta executive who leads Instagram, responded.

"The goal isn't to replace Twitter," he wrote, saying the aim was to create "a public square" for Instagram users who never used Twitter and people who want a "less angry place for conversations."

"Politics and hard news are important, I don't want to imply otherwise. But ... any incremental engagement or revenue they might drive is not at all worth the scrutiny, negativity (let's be honest), or integrity risks that come along with them," Mosseri wrote in a follow-up post.

That may only be corporate posturing in advance of antitrust inquiries—Meta has held off on launching in the European Union, presumably because of the bloc's more aggressive competition and privacy policies—or the intellectual property lawsuits Musk has already threatened to bring.

And if Meta, a company that remains in the total control of one of the

world's wealthiest men and that shifted its focus away from its main source of revenue in favor of spending tens of billions on creating a highly speculative virtual reality "metaverse" over investor objections, is so focused on maximizing returns on investment, it's unclear why they chose to emulate Twitter—a company that recorded an annual profit just twice in its 17 years and happens to now be owned by another tech tycoon whom Zuckerberg may or may not want to beat into a bloody pulp.

Mosseri said Threads won't downrank news posts in its algorithm, so it's unclear how the app might discourage political discourse or encourage idle distraction. But, for their part, the flacks aren't buying what the Meta execs are flogging.

"It's funny for them to say, 'We don't want to be Twitter' when it's a carbon copy of Twitter," the GOP staffer said.

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