Opinion: How Elon Musk's removal of the block function on X could trigger its hellish demise

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

On Saturday, X (formerly Twitter) chairman Elon Musk tweeted he would be removing the microblogging platform's block function. It would remain intact for direct messages, but would otherwise become obsolete.

This is the latest in a series of controversial and often confusing moves from Musk since he took ownership of the platform in October 2022. Why does Musk want to block the block function? And what might the consequences be for users, and indeed the future of the platform?

Why block the 'block?'

Simply, the block function on X prevents one user from interacting with another. With the click of a button, the blocker can deny another user the ability to read their tweets or reshare their content.

Musk's dislike of this feature isn't new. In June he remarked that "blocking public posts makes no sense." He has also condemned campaigns among users to block subscribers paying for a Twitter Blue subscription (which grants them perks such as a blue tick beside their name and the ability to edit posts).

Musk's latest pronouncement might be related to his self-styled "free speech absolutist" persona. Last year, after he announced the deal to purchase X (then Twitter), Musk remarked:

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated."

Accordingly, Musk then restored accounts that had been banned for what previous site moderators classified as dangerous content. These high-profile reinstatements included rapper Kanye West (removed for anti-Semitism), congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (removed for spreading COVID misinformation) and right-wing personality Dominick McGee (who posted child abuse material).

In June of this year, Musk publicly said "distasteful" content—including

tweets celebrating a migrant boat accident in the Mediterranean Sea in which lives were lost—could remain online as long as they weren't illegal.

Of course, "blocking" someone on social media isn't the same as removing their account or deleting content. Blocking is not censorship as this is commonly understood in a social media context; it does not involve, say, removing users or their content from a platform, or even shadow-banning (whereby a platform reduces the visibility of certain posts among a large number of users).

That said, blocking does threaten the pugilistic model of free speech Musk endorses. He has called X the "player versus player" (a kind of dueling mode in online video games) of social media. The likelihood of skirmishes is reduced when "players" can block one another.

What would the consequences be?

Perhaps blocking the "block" function would allow lively and heated (but not harmful) debate to flourish on X. Or perhaps not. As Adi Robertson writes in an article for The Verge:

"Blocking provides some very tangible benefits, helping users (especially high-profile ones) do anything from avoiding harassment to simply cleaning up spam in their replies."

It can also prevent exposure to hate speech, which has risen since Musk took ownership. According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate, X "fails to act on 99% of hate posted by Twitter Blue subscribers." Musk has disputed the findings and filed a lawsuit against the group (an action that sits uneasily alongside his free-speech absolutism).

The inability to block hate speech could help normalize it and create a

hostile environment for people in groups that are often targeted, such as women, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous people and migrants.

X has long been labeled a "hellsite" on account of the toxicity that appears on the platform. In a post-block era, it might become even more hellish.

What happens beyond the block?

Musk has suggested "a stronger form of mute" could replace the block function. The mute function currently allows users to avoid seeing the activities of certain other users—but the muted person can still interact with the muter (such as by commenting on their posts) in a way that a blocked person can't.

What would "a stronger form of mute" look like? Musk hasn't said. His plans to remove the block and implement this function seem particularly unclear when you consider he has already fired so many of the company's workers, including technical staff.

Further, both the Apple Store and Google Play have guidelines stipulating that platforms hosting user-generated content must allow the blocking of other users. Removing this capacity might lead to the app stores dropping X, which could spell economic death for the platform.

Worded differently, Musk might succeed in "blocking" X from its users permanently. Or he may argue a stronger form of mute fulfills the same requirements as the block function. Either way, the signs point to a strong likelihood of X becoming a particularly nightmarish town square.

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