

Why Elon Musk is obsessed with casting X as the most 'authentic' social media platform

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With X, formerly known as Twitter, hitting the [one-year anniversary](#) of Elon Musk's US\$44 billion takeover of the social media platform, it can feel disorienting to try to make sense of all that's gone down.

Blue check-mark verifications [got hawked](#). Internal company documents about content moderation policies [got laundered](#). A puzzling rebrand to "X" [got hatched](#). And a literal cage match with Meta head Mark Zuckerberg was on again and, ultimately, [off again](#).

It appears unclear what, precisely, Musk's ambitions are for the platform. But when a threatening competitor, Threads, emerged in summer 2023, he may have offered a brief window of insight.

A clone of X, Threads [rolled up 100 million users](#) in less than a week after its June launch, becoming the fastest-growing app of all time. Musk promptly erupted with two attacks on Zuckerberg's creation.

The first was catty and, as such, invited notice within digital spaces programmed to promote outrage. [Musk declared](#), "It is infinitely preferable to be attacked by strangers on Twitter, than indulge in the false happiness of hide-the-pain Instagram."

[The second](#)—"You are free to be your true self here"—was more overlooked, yet revealed an essential premise that [social media companies](#) must sell to all their users.

As I argue in my new book, "[The Authenticity Industries](#)," authenticity represents the central battle for social media companies. They design their platforms to demonstrate and facilitate genuine self-performance from users. That's what makes for dependable data, and dependable data—sold to advertisers—is [what makes the internet economy hum](#).

Silicon Valley's commitment to the ideal of authenticity remains ironclad, even as more and more people are starting to recognize that the internet isn't real life.

A life performed

Over the past decade, Instagram—with its glossy, obsessively manicured tableaux—became the aesthetic antithesis against which all other [social media platforms](#) measure that authenticity.

Instagram tinted life by allowing users to apply sun-kissed, nostalgic filters to their photographs. To scrub clean any blemishes on selfies posted there, add-ons like Facetune enabled magazine-quality Photoshopping [and topped paid-app charts](#). Instagram became your highlight reel: galleries of far-flung travels and mouth-watering food porn exquisitely curated—a life performed as much as lived.

"[Instagram's] basically almost designed to make your friends jealous," one executive at TikTok [confided to me](#). "It kind of makes me depressed a little bit sometimes when I go on Instagram and I feel, like, 'Oh, I'm not fit enough. I'm not successful enough.'"

Over time, #NoFilter caveats, blurry photo dumps and shameless "finsta" accounts—a portmanteau of "fake" and "Instagram"—[arose as forms of authenticity backlash](#) to the "false happiness" of the posed lifestyles appearing on users' feeds.

Heck, even Instagram knew it had a problem, copy-and-pasting Snapchat's signature ephemerality and [launching its disappearing Stories feature](#) to lower the pressure on users to post perfection.

If ever a platform, then, has been deserving of [Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian's 2019 quip](#) that "social media, to date, has largely been the domain of real humans being fake," it's probably Instagram.

Different flavors of the same thing

Recall Musk's second, [more revelatory rejoinder](#) on behalf of X: "You

are free to be your true self here."

For two decades, this has been the first commandment of social media promotion—both by platforms and on them.

More broadly, all online communication bears the burden of proof in this vein: It must compensate for the absence of face-to-face verifiability, which a 1993 Peter Steiner [cartoon for The New Yorker](#) satirized with the caption, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Research confirms this. One [clever study](#) by media scholars Meredith Salisbury and Jefferson Pooley scoured the publicity pabulum, CEO platitudes and app store copy from Friendster onward, finding that nearly every site leans on the same rhetorical clichés—like "real life" and "genuine"—as a means of defining itself against the purported phoniness of other sites.

But this might well be the narcissism of tiny differences at work, with Threads only the latest instance of social media copycatting.

In 2020, Wired [incisively tallied](#) how [X's Fleets](#), a 24-hour posting-expiration feature, was a copy of Instagram's Stories, which was itself originally ripped off from Snapchat. [Snapchat developed Spotlight](#) for short-form video content, comparable to Instagram's Reels and YouTube's Shorts, all of which were an attempt to fend off TikTok, itself a reincarnation of Vine.

And all of these, including last year's 56 million-times-downloaded viral sensation, [BeReal](#)—where users snap unfiltered, unposed selfies for friends at random times daily—have promised users the opportunity to be their true selves.

In as much as Musk has pursued anything in his first year as Chief Twit,

that seems to be his ambition: engineering a space with no social guardrails, where any inhibitions of decorum are ignored in favor of speaking, authentically, from the heart.

Ambitions don't match reality

To a certain kind of personality, that's probably an alluring offer. Indeed, Zuckerberg's original—and still most enduring—platform triumph, Facebook, depended on designing a website that induced an online performance of a "true" offline self.

Those norms were embedded in design choices, as Zuckerberg made plain his disregard for our [multistage, two-faced selves](#) in an [oft-quoted line](#), "You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly."

"Single-identity authenticity" was Facebook's early market strategy, and the nascent website initially required users to register with a college email address. The design choice may well have been critical to Facebook vanquishing its closest early competitors, [Friendster](#) and [Myspace](#).

"The .edu email system served as this authenticating clearinghouse," one early Facebook executive [explained to me](#), a phrasing that could as easily be applied to the utility of Instagram accounts today for Threads.

"Really, users 0 through 10 million were all verified and authenticated by the .edu email system, [while] Myspace had 57 Jennifer Anistons."

That authenticating clearinghouse would soon vanish as Facebook opened itself up to users not enrolled in college—like, say, [the disinformation agents](#) who have meddled in U.S. elections from Russia.

A regression to the meanest

All this competition makes for authenticity jockeying: Musk attempted to parry Zuckerberg's Threads threat with his invitation to convene strangers who will stop being polite and [start getting real](#).

But in an ominous echo of Rupert Murdoch's \$500 million [write-off](#) of Myspace, Musk's \$44 billion purchase has struggled with those bot-and-blue check mark difficulties of user verification.

None of this is to say Threads will eventually triumph over X, even as the crisis in the Middle East—and the misinformation circulating because of it—[seems to have initiated](#) another exodus of defectors from X. After all, a month after its launch, Threads had already lost [an estimated](#) 80% of its daily active users.

Threads' vibes may have been cheerful and friendly at the outset—disingenuously so, according to Musk—but it may well prove that, eventually, all social media sites regress toward the meanest.

Musk would probably call that "authenticity." On X, you might not be able to trust the veracity of the user or the information they're spreading. But you can be sure that they don't feel like they have to bite their tongue and act nice.

Social media company names may change. But when identity is the most lucrative commodity they trade in, their fetishization of authenticity won't.

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