Trump’s new company, Trump Media & Technology Group (DJT), has become a kind of tracking stock for the fate of the former president’s political career. DJT, as the company is known, is supposed to be an alternative media enterprise reflecting conservative viewpoints. But as much as anything, it’s a binary bet on Trump himself and his 2024 presidential bid.

Both ventures — Trump the company and Trump the candidate — are slogging through low points. Trump is now mired in the first of four criminal trials on his docket, with jury selection underway in a Manhattan courtroom. The case will determine if Trump illegally falsified business records in 2016 when making a “hush money” payment to cover up an extramarital fling with the porn star Stormy Daniels.

Trump voters may scoff at the charges, but the trial can still damage Trump. New York law requires him to attend, which means less politicking on the campaign trail. The boisterous Trump must sit largely captive as others do the talking, his usual rants reduced to end-of-day pronouncements or overnight posts on his Truth Social platform. The optics are poor, with Trump typically slouched over a table, scowling at the judge. On the first day, the man who derides President Biden as “Sleepy Joe” reportedly nodded off.

The trial could last for six to eight weeks, which is a long time for a presidential candidate to sit on the sidelines. Trump’s legal problems haven’t hurt his popularity with core supporters, but every day in a hostile public environment he can’t control is a chance for Trump to alienate swing voters who will decide the election in November. The one upside for Trump is that cameras can’t film the proceedings, allowing him to deny any embarrassing developments and email his supporters fantastical accounts of his exploits in court.

Trump Media & Technology Group Corp. (DJT)View quote details

NasdaqGM - Nasdaq Real Time Price (USD)

26.33+3.49(15.29%)

As of 12:04PM EDT.Market open.

1D5D1M6MYTD1Y5YMaxFull screen

Trump’s media company reflects the candidate’s personal doldrums. The stock popped in late March when it went public via a merger with a special-purpose entity. But market enthusiasm faded quickly, with the stock now down 65% from its peak a mere three weeks into trading. Trump owns 57.6% of the shares, which means the value of his stake has dropped from $5.3 billion to around $1.8 billion.

Drop Rick Newman a note, follow him on Twitter, or sign up for his newsletter.

FILE - The Truth Social account for former President Donald Trump is seen on a mobile device, Wednesday, March 20, 2024, in New York. Reddit and Trump Media are the first social media companies to begin trading publicly in the last five years. They're also, thanks to the rabid reception among investors, the latest meme stocks. (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File)

The Truth Social account for former President Donald Trump is seen on a mobile device, Wednesday, March 20, 2024. (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File) (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

The more investors learn about Trump’s company, the less they like it. The first batch of negative news came when the company posted its financials for 2023, revealing it lost $58 million on a paltry $4 million in revenue. Then the firm announced plans to issue new shares, diluting the value of existing shares. On April 16, the company said it would roll out a streaming platform, and the stock fell further.

Some DJT shareholders are Trump fans who bought in not as a principled investment but as a way of supporting their man. The Washington Post recently profiled a few of them, including some who feel anxious as they lose money and others who have faith that Trump has a big move up his sleeve. Media titan Barry Diller called such investors “dopes.”

Everybody has known for months, arguably years, that Trump faces a legal gauntlet and could even end up in jail. Trump Media & Technology Group itself acknowledges that its principal’s legal woes could imperil the company. “An adverse outcome in one or more of the legal proceedings could negatively affect TMTG,” a company SEC filing said. Investors who believe in Trump’s mythic invincibility are learning that markets can make mortals out of anybody.

Is a turnaround possible? Sure. Trump could prevail in the Manhattan trial and claim vindication. It looks as if none of the other three criminal cases will go to trial before the election, so an acquittal in Manhattan would leave Trump able to campaign as a free man.

September will be a key month for Trump Media & Technology. That’s when Trump and other insiders will be able to sell their shares. If Trump unloads, the stock would probably decline further, with markets tanking it as a sign that Trump lacks confidence in his own operation. If he holds, there would be less reason to panic.

Then comes what may be the most important date on the company’s calendar: Election Day 2024. If Trump wins the presidency for a second time, it’s bullish for the stock, assuming Trump continues to post on Truth Social. What is now a fringe social media site could become a sort of quasi-government mouthpiece, with everybody orbiting Trump World forced to join.

If Trump loses, it could doom the company. As a 78-year-old two-time loser to Biden, Trump’s political career would be over. He’d stay on the scene as the godfather of the Republican Party for as long as he could, but there would be no imperative to follow his posts or activities. The company exists to promote Trump himself and seems likely to wither if, or when, he fades from prominence.

Polls show Trump and Biden in a tight race, with Biden picking up a bit of steam recently. By the fall, you’ll probably be able to tell who’s ahead in the polls by looking at DJT’s stock price. Maybe that will be better for the company than having to prove its mettle as a business.