

"Twitter subscribes to Scroll" - Casey Newton

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What the company's recent acquisitions mean for media



Alexander Shatov / Unsplash

One of the many strange and unsettling aspects about modern life is that Twitter now has a functional product organization. Every few days now, some nice person at the company emails me to say that the following day, Twitter will be introducing a product that seems thoughtful and even good.

This stands in contrast to the period between roughly 2016 and 2018, when product announcements from Twitter would arrive roughly quarterly, and would say something like “we have now added the ability to add punctuation to tweets in Portuguese,” with a note at the end saying that the head of product had just resigned.

Anyway, let’s talk about two big moves the company made this week, which highlight the degree to which platforms are now building paid tools to complement their primarily ad-based businesses. It’s a story about Twitter, but it’s also a story about the future of media — and whether digital events, subscriptions, tips, and other paid products can build a more sustainable future for journalism.

First, after 15 years in existence, Twitter introduced its first tool to help individual people make money on the platform. It’s part of an expansion of Spaces, the company’s Clubhouse competitor. Here’s [Sarah Perez in TechCrunch](#):

Twitter Spaces, the company's new live audio rooms feature, is opening up more broadly. The company [announced](#) today it's making Twitter Spaces available to any account with 600 followers or more, including both iOS and Android users. It also officially unveiled some of the features it's preparing to launch, like Ticketed Spaces, scheduling features, reminders, support for co-hosting, accessibility improvements and more. [...]

Twitter Spaces will soon support [multiple co-hosts](#), and creators will be able to better market and even charge for access to their live events on Twitter Spaces. One feature, arriving in the next few weeks, will allow users to schedule and set reminders about Spaces they don't want to miss. This can also help creators who are marketing their event in advance, as part of the RSVP process could involve pushing users to "set a reminder" about the upcoming show.

While ticketed Spaces are experimental, their existence still represents a notable departure for a company that has typically only let its users make money from the platform indirectly. Twitter-owned live-streaming app Periscope introduced tipping in 2017, but it never really caught on. And so viral tweets are often followed by a link to the user's SoundCloud, OnlyFans, Substack, [cashtag](#), and so on.

What kind of Spaces might work as ticketed events? fundraisers; cryptocurrency enthusiasts; football game handicappers; and good-old-fashioned influencers doing low-key virtual meetups with their super fans. There's plenty of room to run there, and despite the fact that [Clubhouse's downloads are cratering](#), a Twitter executive told me this week that Spaces is the company's top product priority this year. So expect more paid tools, including tipping, to show up in Spaces soon.

A second puzzle piece in Twitter's explorations around paid tools arrived today when the company bought a year-old service called [Scroll](#). For \$5 a month, [Scroll removes ads](#) on the site of major publishers including Vox Media sites, the *Atlantic*, and G/O Media. Scroll keeps \$1.50 of that amount; the rest is split between participating publishers based on how often users visit their sites. In essence, Scroll is a more ethical ad blocker; I signed up for it at launch and have been a happy customer ever since.

So what is Twitter going to do with Scroll? Here's [Twitter VP Mike Park](#):

We plan to include Scroll as part of an upcoming subscription offering we're currently exploring. As a Twitter subscriber, picture getting access to premium features where you can easily read articles from your favorite news outlet or [a writer's newsletter from Revue](#), with a portion of your subscription going to the publishers and writers creating the content.

As [Dieter Bohn notes](#) [The Verge](#), maybe this looks something like Apple News. ("Instead of the web tech hack that stops ads at a browser level, it could be a feature inside the Twitter app itself — or even a future news reading app," Bohn writes, plausibly.) At the very least, given how much news consumption takes place on Twitter, giving journalism junkies a seamless way to read stories ad-free within Twitter's in-app browser strikes me as a great idea.

(Not a great idea: Twitter's decision to kill Scroll-owned [Nuzzel](#), which keeps track of links being shared by the people you follow and sends you push alerts whenever people are going crazy over a story. Twitter says it will re-create a version of Nuzzel inside Twitter; for the sake of all other journalists, here's hoping that happens soon.)

It would be great if, once integrated into Twitter, Scroll generated meaningful revenue for publishers. The bull case for this is that people are constantly reading news stories in Twitter already. (I've passively paid *The Verge* \$1.89 this month through Scroll; you don't need to find all that many customers like me to have that a huge business for Twitter and for *Verge* owner Vox Media.)

The bear case, though, is that Scroll didn't seem to get much traction in the year it was around. I suspect the vast majority of people who want to block ads simply install free ad blockers, rather than give money to a startup. Either way, though, I really like the *principle* of Scroll. Platforms like Google and Facebook have essentially tried to [buy off big publishers with opaque deals](#). Twitter's approach, on the other hand, is based on the idea that publishers should be compensated based on how much people are actually reading them — something that seems well worth trying.

So far, Twitter has hinted at two kinds of subscription products. One is "Super Follows," which will let you subscribe to individual creators a la carte. The other is some kind of "Twitter Premium," which [Bloomberg previously reported](#) is likely to involve a grab-bag of features, including use of the enterprise Twitter client Tweetdeck, "undo send," enhanced profile customization, and more. It now seems clear that Scroll will be part of that bundle as well.

Both products have their appeal, at least to me. They could lessen the company's reliance on advertising, an industry that Google, Facebook, and increasingly Amazon have come to dominate. They could offer a glimmer of hope to the publishers who have also struggled to compete in the ad business. And while I can't imagine Twitter will provide more than supplemental revenue to most publishers, and even most creators, it still represents a principled approach to returning some of the value created on the platform to the people who are creating it.

The question looming over Twitter, as ever, is how long all of this will take to ship. But if recent history is any guide, it could arrive faster than we think.

Pushback

Thanks to everyone who wrote in with thoughts about my piece yesterday about [how Basecamp blew up](#). In a blog post, Basecamp CEO Jason Fried [offered a new apology to the staff today](#): "David and I completely own the consequences, and we're sorry. We have a lot to learn and reflect on, and we will."

Debate over the founders' actions continued to rage. Jon Stokes argued the real problem at Basecamp was making employees feel like they had a real stake in the company, [when in fact they had no equity at all](#). On the opposite side of the manager-employee divide, contributors to the Rails community — founded by Basecamp co-founder David Heinemeier Hansson — [worried that its brand was becoming toxic and could derail their careers](#).

Personally, I was honored to be blasted in print for writing a cowardly "hit piece" by the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* [in an unsigned editorial](#). A hit piece, in manager parlance, is a piece of journalism in which workers are allowed to discuss their working conditions. Suffice to say Basecamp won't be the last company to receive such treatment in **Platformer**.

One staffing update: Basecamp's director of operations, Troy Toman, became the latest to submit his resignation to the company today, I'm told. His last day is May 15.

The Ratio

Today in news that could affect public perception of the big tech companies.

↓ **Trending down:** [Facebook and Instagram's custom notices to get you to opt into App Tracking Transparency falsely imply that failing to opt in could result in the companies charging for access](#).

Given how long the company has had to write this copy, you'd think it would have a better sales pitch. (Kim Lyons / *The Verge*)

Governing

☆ [In day two of the **Apple-Epic Games** trial, Epic CEO **Tim Sweeney** argued his company's battle against Apple's 30 percent cut is an existential fight for survival.](#) Here's Nick Statt at *Protocol*:

"The long-term evolution of Fortnite will be opening up Fortnite as a platform for creators to distribute their work to users ... and creators will make the majority of profits," Sweeney said. "With Apple taking 30% off of the top, it makes it very hard for Epic and creators to exist in this future world."

In other words, Epic sees Apple's platform fees as a threat to what Fortnite could become in the future, not necessarily what it is right now. If creators are selling digital goods on Fortnite, and giving a cut (presumably 12%) to Epic, it's not ideal to turn around and give 30% of that smaller cut right to Apple, Sweeney argues.

Some other **Apple** trial revelations:

- [Sweeney admitted he would have just taken a deal from Apple for a lower commission rather than fight, had one been offered.](#) (Chance Miller / *9to5Mac*)
- [Apple's **Phil Schiller** floated the idea of cutting App Store fees a decade ago, as long as the store maintained \\$1 billion in profitability.](#) (Mark Gurman / *Bloomberg*)
- [Fortnite made more than \\$9 billion in revenue in its first two years.](#) (Mitchell Clark / *The Verge*)

☆ [Donald Trump launched his new "social media platform," and it's just a blog.](#) For years mankind wondered what would happen if blogging technology fell into the wrong hands ... and we're about to find out. (Makena Kelly / *The Verge*)

[Ahead of the **Oversight Board's** decision Wednesday morning in the **Trump** case, a look at the incomprehensible nature of "Facebook jail" for most of the people who serve time there.](#) "Since it began taking cases in October, the Oversight Board has received more than 220,000 appeals from users, and issued eight rulings—six of them overturning Facebook's initial decision." (Kirsten Grind / *Wall Street Journal*)

Related: [Facebook has applied its "newsworthiness" exception to moderating political figures only six times; it took action against Trump's account seven times last year, mostly for copyright issues.](#) (Elizabeth Dwoskin and Cat Zakrzewski / *Washington Post*)

Also related: [Even Google employees can't unlock their own Gmail accounts.](#) (Matthew Humphries / *PC Mag*)

[Facebook approved a range of troubling advertisements for children ages 13 to 17. Ads related to pills, eating disorders, and dating services were all greenlighted; a recent experiment in Australia had similar results.](#) (*Tech Transparency Project*)

[Social networks have offered an important lifeline for people in India amid a devastating surge of COVID-19 cases.](#) Amid government mismanagement of the crisis, individuals are using **Facebook** and **Twitter** to source medical supplies and form mutual-aid networks. (Suhasini Raj / *New York Times*)

[An internal audit revealed that thousands of Amazon employees had access to third-party seller data, which might have been misused in a variety of ways.](#) The document may lend evidence to an investigation exploring whether the company has used third-party seller data to inform the development of its own products. (Simon Van Dorpe and Vincent Manacourt / *Politico*)

[Etsy](#) said it would invest \$40 million in new content moderation efforts after an investigation found illegal items including ivory available for sale on the platform. Award many [impact points](#) to *Insider's* Rob Price for this one. (Alyse Stanley / *Gizmodo*)

[A vast network of surveillance cameras in Moscow that was advertised as a crime prevention tool has been repurposed to crush dissent against Vladimir Putin](#). Police arrested more than 50 people who participated in protests supporting **Alexey Navalny** this weekend. (Ilya Arkhipov and Jake Rudnitsky / Bloomberg)

Industry

☆ [Clubhouse](#) was downloaded only about 900,000 times in April, down from February's peak of 9.6 million. I think the reason why is clear: there simply are not enough regular Clubhouse shows by the team at Andreessen Horowitz. (Katie Canales / *Insider*)

[Instagram](#) added automated captions. Last year, I wrote about how [the addition of this feature to Instagram's separate Threads app had gone viral on TikTok](#). (Sarah Perez / *TechCrunch*)

[Apple](#) hired **Samy Bengio**, a distinguished computer scientist who left [Google](#) earlier this year amid the [Timnit Gebru](#) fallout. "Bengio is expected to lead a new AI research unit at Apple under **John Giannandrea**, senior vice president of machine learning and AI strategy." (Stephen Nellis and Paresh Dave / Reuters)

[Sony](#) invested in [Discord](#) and said it would integrate its Playstation Network into the app. The integration won't come until next year (!); terms of the investment were not disclosed. (Jeff Grubb / *VentureBeat*)

[Genies](#) raised \$65 million to let you build virtual avatars wearing custom digital clothes that you can sell as NFTs, or something. This company has been around for many years, and I have never had the slightest clue what they were up to. I still don't. (Dean Takahashi / *VentureBeat*)

[A Filipino dance duo popularized a song called "Heartbreak Anniversary" on TikTok with a viral dance, but have been unable to capitalize on its success financially](#). TikTok's creator program is not yet available on in the Philippines; the story helps to capture the woeful state of creator monetization tools outside the United States. (Andrew Deck / *Rest of World*)

[TikTok personalities are making a name for themselves by delivering news to Generation Z](#). "Personalities unaffiliated with any traditional media outlet are aggregating national headlines and the latest news — and delivering it to millions, many of them young viewers, on the video platform." (Kalina Newman / *Washington Post*)

Those good tweets

Talk to me

Send me tips, comments, questions, and Nuzzel obituaries: casey@platformer.news.

14391 Words

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