

Dismay as X's most-followed accounts given blue ticks for free

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Elon Musk has reversed one of his most notorious decisions since taking over X, the social network better known as Twitter, and started bestowing blue ticks on the site's most-followed users – whether they want them or not. The entrepreneur and one-time “Chief Twit” had tweeted last week that the service would grant free “premium” status to any user with more than 2,500 “verified subscriber follows” and accounts with more than 5,000 would get “premium+”. That policy is now being enacted. The two tiers of paid-for service provide a number of benefits. The cheaper gives users fewer adverts and more prominent placement in the site's algorithmic curation and the more expensive adds access to X's “anti-woke” AI chatbot Grok, zero adverts and even greater prioritisation for replies. But both are best known for the public-facing perk of a blue tick next to the user's profile. That checkmark, still known as “verification” on the site, was once reserved for prominent users who had proved their identity, but was opened up under Musk to any subscriber of the service's paid-for tier, then known as Twitter Blue. In an effort to boost Blue subscriptions, Musk's company started removing “legacy” checkmarks this time last year. The hope was that the site's most prominent and dedicated users would sign up for the paid-for service instead, boosting revenue and the credibility of a premium account. Instead, among many communities, the move cratered the social standing of those with verification: in the absence of highly regarded users with visible checkmarks, the sign became a scarlet – or rather, cyan – letter marking users out as wanting to buy respect. The problem became so bad that by August, the newly rebranded X introduced the ability to hide checkmarks entirely, in an effort to encourage users to subscribe for the other features. Now, though, it has taken the opposite approach: as the “free” ticks roll out, users who had never paid are expressing dismay at their new status. “Shit. I've been forcibly bluechecked,” posted Marcy Wheeler, a journalist. The Wired writer Lauren Goode said: “My blue check is back and I just want to make clear I am not paying El*n M*sk for this thanks very much.” It isn't clear how many blue checks have been granted – nor how many were unwanted. As is policy at the social network since Musk took over, X did not respond to a request for comment.