

# Elon Musk hurls defiant, profanity-laced retort at fleeing advertisers

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Elon Musk has issued a defiant and profanity-laced message for the advertisers who pulled money from X in recent weeks amid a backlash over his endorsement of an antisemitic tweet and reports of increased hate speech on the platform. Video of the interview, which was widely circulated, showed that Musk said, “Don’t advertise,” on Wednesday during an on-stage interview at an event in New York. “If someone’s going to try to blackmail me with advertising, blackmail me with money, go fuck yourself.” Moments before, the X owner had offered a moment of contrition for his 15 November tweet that endorsed an antisemitic post on the site. He said it had been perhaps his worst post in his history of messages that included many “foolish” ones – including a 2018 tweet that cost him \$40m in fines from the US Securities and Exchange Commission. Musk’s brief apology was followed by his characteristic antagonism. During the interview, part of the New York Times’ DealBook Summit, he bristled at the accusation of antisemitism and said advertisers who left X, formerly known as Twitter, should not think they could blackmail him. He said “fuck you” numerous times, and at one point added the words “hey, Bob,” an apparent reference to Robert Iger, the chief executive of Walt Disney, which pulled ads on X. Apple, IBM and Coca-Cola also have removed paid advertisements from X in a continuing trend that could result in up to \$75m in revenue losses. The advertiser exodus began after non-profit Media Matters published a report that showed advertisements from major companies alongside pro-Nazi posts (Musk filed a lawsuit against the organization). It further escalated after Musk publicly agreed with an antisemitic tweet accusing Jewish people of “hatred against whites”. Musk’s comments to advertisers come even as he acknowledged that their exodus could spell disaster for X, which he purchased for \$44bn in October last year. “What this advertising boycott is going to do is, it is going to kill the company,” he said on Wednesday. “And the whole world will know that those advertisers killed the company.” Later, Linda Yaccarino, the CEO of X, described Musk’s interview as “wide ranging and candid” and made a pitch to advertisers. “X is standing at a unique and amazing intersection of Free Speech and Main Street – and the X community is powerful and is here to welcome you,” she wrote on the platform. However, ad industry figures said her efforts to win back clients had been severely hampered. Sir Martin Sorrell, the executive chair of the digital advertising business S4 Capital, said: “Elon’s comments just make it harder for Linda Yaccarino. No matter how effective she is with them, clients don’t like or court controversy.” Lou Paskalis, the chief executive of the marketing consultancy AJL Advisory, said the outburst indicated that Musk wanted to use his appearance to say he was “fed up with being beholden to advertisers”. “I don’t think advertisers were coming back before this outburst,” Paskalis added. “When he touched the third rail of antisemitism it created a level of reputational risk for advertisers that exceeded any

value they could earn from advertising on the platform, even if the ads were free.” Bankruptcy could actually be “the best thing to happen to X”, according to Joseph Teasdale, head of tech at Enders Analysis. “The creditors would take control, and sell it to someone normal who could rename it “Twitter” and reinstate basic moderation and content controls to reassure advertisers that the platform isn’t reputational plutonium.” Musk’s antics are the latest in an ongoing series of erratic decisions he has made since taking the helm of Twitter, many of which have concerned advertisers – who have long been the core of the platform’s business. After the backlash against his controversial post on X, Musk traveled to Israel and spoke with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister. On Wednesday, Musk said the trip had been planned before his message and was independent of the issue. During the conversation with Netanyahu, which took place shortly after Musk attacked the Anti-Defamation League, Netanyahu urged the billionaire to strike a balance between the protection of free speech online and fighting hate speech. Reuters contributed to this report