

Threads v Twitter – is this the main bout between Musk and Zuckerberg?

Publication Date: 2023-07-04

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Section: Technology

Tags: X, Threads, Internet, Digital media, Newspapers & magazines, Meta, Instagram, analysis

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/04/threads-v-twitter-is-this-main-bout-musk-v-zuckerberg>



Elon Musk recently challenged Mark Zuckerberg to a physical cage fight – but the real battle between the two billionaires will begin on Thursday when Zuckerberg launches Threads, his company's Twitter competitor. Zuckerberg's Meta believes there is a gap in the market for a Twitter-style social network for short posts that is technically stable and isn't subject to the whims of Musk, who despite being one of the world's richest men spends a considerable amount of time engaged in disputes on social media. Threads was unveiled to Meta staff last week, with the chief product officer, Chris Cox, saying the company had been working on the new product since January, according to an internal briefing reported by the Verge. Cox said the company had already approached prominent figures such as Oprah Winfrey to see if they will jump ship to the new site: "We've been hearing from creators and public figures who are interested in having a platform that is sanely run, that they believe that they can trust and rely upon for distribution." The comment appeared to get under Musk's skin, with the Twitter owner breaking away from preparations for his fight to comment about Threads: "Thank goodness they're so sanely run." Threads is expected to have a similar feel to Twitter but is branded as "Instagram's text-based conversation app", with preview screenshots suggesting users will be able to use their existing Instagram login details, easing the sign-up process. Twitter claims to have enlisted about 250 million global users, substantially fewer than the billions who use Facebook and Instagram, but has long punched above its weight in terms of global influence on the news agenda. Yet the site is creaking since the Musk takeover. The Tesla chief executive spent much of 2022 trying to back out of his \$44bn (£34.5bn) bid to buy the social network, eventually completing his debt-laden purchase of the social network last October. Since then he has fired the vast majority of Twitter's staff, unwound policies designed to stop hate speech, and watched as mainstream advertisers flee the platform – a problem for a company that still derives most of its money from advertising. He has also shifted to a business model where users have to pay for verified status, meaning users who refuse to cough up are less likely to find an audience for their tweets – and enabling people intent on self-promotion to essentially buy a prominent position on the site, regardless of the quality of the posts. Over the weekend the already-unstable Twitter started to fall apart at the seams, with the site becoming inaccessible for many users. Musk said he had chosen to limit the number of posts that non-paying users could view to 600 a day in an attempt to stop unauthorised third-party access of his site. An alternative explanation is that Twitter simply was forced to take emergency steps as its servers struggle to cope with demand. Whatever the real reason, it essentially made the site unusable for most of the heavy users who produce the vast majority of the site's content. Attempts to seek an explanation on any of these policy moves are impossible, since Musk has fired all of Twitter's communications staff. Journalists who ask the company to explain its actions now receive an automatic reply featuring a poo emoji. Mike

Proulx, vice-president at market research firm Forrester, said the weekend's chaos had been "remarkably bad" for users and advertisers. "Advertisers depend on reach and engagement yet Twitter is currently decimating both," he told AFP. Zuckerberg has long been fascinated by Twitter's influence and discussed buying the site back in 2008. One challenge for his Threads products will be whether people are willing to blend their Instagram profiles – often featuring personal life updates and family pictures – with more public-facing posts on sites such as Twitter. A bigger issue is whether people who have spent years building up large followings on Twitter – giving them valuable access to an audience – can be persuaded to start again on a new site. Other Twitter rivals have also experienced rapid growth in recent days. Bluesky, which resembles a stripped-back version of Twitter, grew its user base by 20% on Monday. But the site has struggled to cope with demand and is now operating on an invite-only basis, meaning only 250,000 people have access to the service. Despite this, the likes of Nigella Lawson and LBC presenter James O'Brien have chosen to start posting on the network – albeit to substantially smaller audiences than they could reach on Twitter. Still, there does appear to be a demand to try Twitter alternatives. Dmitry Grozoubski, a former Australian diplomat, posted on Bluesky about the upstart site attracting big names: "It's just incredible that Musk has managed to damage Twitter so badly that very large accounts are willing to abandon sometimes literally millions of followers and tweet to, like, 300 folks on here. Like, business school case study incredible."