

# TechScape: Why Elon Musk is taking trying to mute anti-hate-speech group

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Censorship, or rather his stance against it, is a key reason why Elon Musk bought Twitter for \$44bn last year. His social media company's lawsuit against an anti-hate speech group refers to censorship, or variations on the word, eight times. But for critics of his complaint against the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), it is Musk who is doing the censoring. "The intent is definitely to get the centre to shut up. That's the whole point of this suit, to prevent the centre from exercising any speech that Musk doesn't like," says Prof Brian Quinn from Boston College law school. In the civil complaint brought against CCDH by X Corp, the parent of Twitter (which has in turn been rebranded as "X"), Musk's business accuses the US-UK campaign group of "advocating for internet censorship" by seeking to "prevent public dialogue and the public's access to free expression in favor of an ideological echo chamber that conforms to CCDH's favored viewpoints." The CCDH, however, would argue that it flags examples of misinformation, hate speech and other types of harmful content that appear on various social media platforms. Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, and chair of the Molly Rose Foundation, was among the internet safety campaigners who criticised the lawsuit, describing it as "an unprecedented attack on civil society". The lawsuit isn't technically about CCDH's political agenda, either. As Quinn says, those tilts at CCDH are just "filler". CCDH is a thorn in the side for a lot of social media companies, including Meta and TikTok, who have criticised the methodologies and conclusions in CCDH reports. But neither have responded with lawsuits. What's in the complaint – and what's not The complaint filed in a federal court in California alleges: that CCDH breached X's terms of service by scraping the site for data; that it breached the computer fraud and abuse act by improperly using someone's login to access Brandwatch, a software tool that allows users to analyse tweet content; that CCDH intentionally interfered with Brandwatch's contract with X that "unauthorised" access to X data is not allowed; and that CCDH intended to cause Brandwatch to breach the agreement with X. On Monday, X accused the European Climate Foundation, which funds climate campaign groups, of giving CCDH access to Brandwatch. The ECF has been contacted for comment. Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond, says the case could take "months and even years" to resolve. The X complaint alleges that CCDH's behaviour has cost the company "tens of millions of dollars" in lost revenues through advertisers withholding spending. It says a "number" of regular advertisers immediately paused spending on X after viewing CCDH reports. It also claims that 16 unnamed advertisers have stopped spending, paused advertising plans or decided not to reactivate campaigns, after reading CCDH work. Experts are sceptical about the complaint's claims. Lou Paskalis, founder of advertising consultancy AJL Advisory, says the research is not a major cause of X's problems (carmaker Audi and pharmaceutical firm Pfizer are among the companies that have

boycotted the platform since Musk bought it). “I believe advertisers long ago decided that Twitter was not a safe place for their advertising investments, strictly because of the antics of Elon Musk,” he says, adding that CCDH research is “just another data point” in a “very long list of data points” that are pushing advertisers away. X has been contacted for comment. According to Imran Ahmed, CCDH’s chief executive, the organisation will keep working through the lawsuit, although it will cost “hundreds of thousands of dollars” to fight it. Ahmed says the organisation is “going to have to raise” money for its defence costs. “My job as CEO is to ensure that we are continuing to do our work,” he told me, adding that CCDH will continue to hold “Twitter’s feet to the fire”. X is demanding unspecified damages (the complaint alleges that CCDH’s reports have cost X tens of millions of dollars in lost advertising business) and, effectively, barring CCDH from using Brandwatch to conduct research on X. The lawsuit also appears to indulge in light conspiracy theorising (a narrative norm for some corners of social media platforms). It alleges, seemingly without evidence, that CCDH is being “supported by funding from X Corp’s commercial competitors, as well as government entities and their affiliates”. It adds that CCDH is acting with the “intent to inflict significant financial harm on X Corp, including at the behest of and in concert with funders, supporters, and other entities.” The lawsuit admits that X “lacks sufficient information” to name these alleged backers. Who is behind the CCDH – and what’s next for X? Ahmed declines to name CCDH’s financial supporters but says they are “members of the public and philanthropic organisations”. He adds: “We don’t take money from governments and we don’t take money from social media organisations.” Alex Stamos, professor at the Center for Security and International Cooperation at Stanford University, who has conducted research warning about moderation standards on Twitter, said in a podcast last month that while CCDH research “points out things that actually happen”, it is not peer-reviewed and contrasted its approach with the methods of social scientists. But he added: “That being said, they should not be sued for that.” Asked about the criticisms of CCDH’s methods in the lawsuit, Ahmed says he is “100% confident” in the organisation’s methodologies and conclusions. Musk wants X to become an “everything app” akin to China’s WeChat, with the ability to make financial payments through the app one of the biggest changes within that shift. But in the meantime, X is a platform dependent on advertising for the revenue that will fund that transformation. And the complaint argues that CCDH is scaring away advertisers, who accounted for 90% of Twitter’s \$5.1bn in annual revenues in 2021. “Those reports and articles have ... caused significant financial harm to X Corp, including via lost advertising revenues,” says the complaint. By Musk’s own admission, advertising revenue has fallen by 50% at X, which implies an annual cost running into the billions of dollars. Suing CCDH won’t claw that back, nor rectify a perception that X has become too erratic under Musk’s leadership for advertisers to trust it. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday.