The demise of Twitter: how a ‘utopian vision’ for social media became a ‘toxic mess’

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If anything is emblematic of the demise of Twitter, it is the rise and stall of the account of Oprah Winfrey. Oprah joined the platform in 2009, tweeting for the first time live from her wildly popular TV show: “HI TWITTERS. THANK YOU FOR A WARM WELCOME. FEELING REALLY 21st CENTURY.” It was “a breakthrough moment” for the platform, says Axel Bruns, professor in the digital media research centre at Queensland University of Technology. “That really was the moment where numbers absolutely took off.” These days, Oprah still has an account on the now-renamed X, with 41.7m followers. But since November 2022, a month after Elon Musk’s acquisition of the site was finalised, she has posted just once – in January 2023, when she told Chelsea Clinton she was “still laughing out LoUD for real □” over Clinton accidentally wearing two different black shoes to an event. Sign up for Guardian Australia’s free morning and afternoon email newsletters for your daily news roundup Debates about X have reignited in the last week, as the Australian government has taken the platform to court in an effort to get it to remove a video of a Sydney bishop being allegedly stabbed as he officiated a church service last week. X says it has complied with orders to remove footage of the stabbing (though ironically, the post announcing its compliance had a comment directly underneath in which someone had shared the full and graphic video) and Musk has been scathing about Australia’s requests for the footage to be taken down. X has been contacted for comment. But as the debate has raged about what responsibility social media platforms have for stopping the spread of violent or extremist content, another question has emerged: what even is Twitter/X any more? What has become of a site that was once utterly indispensable to the news cycle and political debate and now is increasingly abandoned by those who once checked it religiously? The beginning: ‘a utopian vision’ In Twitter’s early years, it had lofty goals, says a former employee at Twitter Australia, who does not wish to be named. “I think back then it was definitely a utopian vision. Like so many of these founders, they really saw themselves as disruptors, as creating a space for genuine public discourse,” she says. “I think people really enjoyed it back then – it was a really fast-moving, innovative platform, you could get breaking news, you could follow and connect with people you really admired. It always had pockets of being a toxic swamp, even early on, but it wasn’t entirely like that.” “It had social cachet,” she says. “Remember when everyone was obsessed with having a blue tick … and people who didn’t have one pretended not to care?” Exact numbers of active monthly users are not available, but while Twitter/X has never had the broad mainstream appeal of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or TikTok, for years it had an outsize impact on the world of news and politics. “It’s a very specific and limited audience,” Bruns says. “But the kind of audience you could reach on Twitter were journalists, politicians, activists, experts of various forms … often the people who are influential in other

communities both online and offline." Belinda Barnet, senior lecturer in media and communications at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, says: "It became a company that really made itself absolutely central to the news cycle. In essence, it became a tool that journalists in particular just couldn't afford to do without." This was partly because the functionality of Twitter – specifically @ mentions and hashtags – made it so good for breaking news. In Japan, for instance, Twitter became big partly because in 2011, when the country was hit by the devastating tsunami, people were using it as a way of communicating and organising, the former Twitter employee says. "It became a real lifeline for people, it's the way people were getting rescued," she said. Pew research from 2021 found that 69% of US Twitter users said they got news from the site, 46% said the site had increased their understanding of current events and 30% said it had made them feel more politically engaged. The breaking news functionality was not without its issues. While the immediacy of the platform gave voices to dissidents and citizen journalists, making it crucial for uprisings like those seen in the Arab spring, it also allowed politicians to circumvent the traditional mediation of journalists, says Bruns. "There are quite a few politicians who essentially stopped giving interviews to journalists, because then they also have to expose themselves to critical questions, and basically just posted their announcements on Twitter." There have always been issues around misinformation and trolling, says Barnet, but the company adopted measures to try to combat some of the worst of the effects, by implementing what she calls the "three pillars": blue tick verification of users, moderation policies and a trust and safety team. "These things all worked in concert to make it reasonably reliable during a breaking news event, which is why people went there. Misinformation did go viral on the old Twitter, but they would often just kill the trend before it got anywhere," she said. The present: Musk's wild west All three of these pillars were dismantled swiftly after Musk acquired the platform at the end of 2022, Barnet says. The trust and safety teams were among those fired by Musk in the wild weeks after he acquired the company for US$44bn and walked into the headquarters on his first day holding a ceramic sink. A video of Musk's entrance was posted to the site with the caption: "Let that sink in". Many of those who had been blocked from the site for breaching its online rules, including Donald Trump, had their accounts reinstated (though Trump's account was later blocked again). The verification process changed dramatically. Instead of people being granted blue ticks because they were a public figure or worked for a recognised news site, ticks were now available for purchase. The approach to moderation also changed. Musk's spat with the Australian government reveals something about his vision for X, which he sees as a bastion of free speech. "They're very reluctant to engage in any kind of moderation," says Bruns. "To some extent that represents a broader sense in the US about free speech that it is an absolute good above all. Whereas elsewhere in Australia and Europe and many other places there's much more about needing to balance the rights of free speech and the right to freedom from harmful speech. And for many otherwise quite liberal people in the US, that sounds like censorship, essentially." Ironically, X has suspended accounts of people who have criticised Musk, including the accounts of several high-profile journalists from CNN, the New York Times and the Washington Post who had been critical of him in 2022. At the same time, he banned an account tracking the whereabouts of his own personal jet using publicly available data. "Elon wants it both ways," says Barnet. "He wants it to be the original Twitter, which was indeed, absolutely crucial to the news cycle", but also to "take away the pillars, the processes that Twitter had worked out over years and years are what is conducive to a community that can find facts." "I think it's turning into a toxic mess," says Barnet. The future: an uncontrollable place Research from Pew found that in the first few months after Musk's acquisition of Twitter, 60% of US Twitter users took a break of a few weeks or more from the platform. A quarter of those surveyed said they did not see themselves using the site at all within a year. Even the most prolific tweeters were using the platform less, with a 25% dip in the number of tweets they posted per month. Whether the trend has continued is a harder question to answer, in part because under Musk, it has become prohibitively expensive for researchers studying social media to keep up their work. For many years, Twitter made application programming interfaces (APIs) available to academic researchers and private sector organisations for a price. About a year ago, the cost to access these APIs skyrocketed. Aaron Smith, director of data labs at Pew, says that his centre has developed a "fairly rich body of work" on Twitter over many years, but since the prices for accessing tweets increased – he says the annual fee to access the API is now "larger than our team's entire research budget for a couple of years" – they have not been able to do any more research about the platform. Bruns says academics are in the same boat. "You just can't do any particularly explorative research, looking for hate speech bots or misinformation on the platform. Essentially, [X] pretty much priced themselves out of the market." He says this is a shame, as academic research on Twitter used to enable the platform to identify and clean up pockets of hate speech and misinformation, which will now go even more unchecked. "It's certainly already starting to transform into something that's more similar to … platforms like Gab or Parler, or even [Trump's] Truth Social where you've got far, far right people furiously agreeing with each other and furiously hating on everyone else." Even the former employee has since deactivated her account. "I think what it is now is a really dangerous space, it's uncontrollable," she says. "I miss it sometimes. I always thought it was an amazing newswire for journalists and citizen journalists … I don't know, I find myself sitting with breaking news and wondering where to go. There's a hole that has been left behind. I'm hoping someone will try and fill that gap."