TechScape: Can Jack Dorsey's Bluesky really take over from Twitter?

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Let's check in on social media. In February, Bluesky released its iOS app. The social network began as a spinoff within Twitter to build a fully "decentralised" protocol, something that could replicate the Twitter experience without placing the company itself at the centre of impossible decisions around content moderation. Its history is intimately tied up with Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey's pivot towards bitcoin and decentralisation, and Dorsey still sits on Bluesky's board of directors, but the company is now independent of Twitter, and over the past three months its userbase has been growing rapidly. There's a lot to be said about the technology of Bluesky, but its importance to the success of the social network is minor compared to a single decision made back in February: handing control of the waitlist to the users. Because the service is still in beta, you you have to be invited to use it. Existing users get roughly one invite code every two weeks, though a slightly murky system seems to hand more codes to some than others. Download the app, enter the code, pick a username and you're live on Bluesky, staring at a feed that is … basically the same as Twitter's. The invitation requirement ensures several things, in roughly ascending order of importance: firstly, that the service grows at a steady rate, rather than exploding with interest and then collapsing under the weight of user numbers; secondly, that no one arrives on Bluesky without knowing at least one other user, avoiding the horrors of an empty feed; thirdly, because it means that the network is filled with users who have hurdled the low bar of at least one person wanting to speak to them; and lastly, because it means loads of people want to join Bluesky but can't, and are instead filling up every other social media feed with requests for invite codes. Artificial scarcity is a powerful marketing tool, and access to Bluesky is as scarce as can be right now. As of last week, the app reportedly had more than 70,000 users. That's a lot more than zero, but a fraction of Twitter's 360 million. And yet among those 70,000 users are US congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, actor Kumail Nanjiani, and, cuttingly, the recording artist Grimes, who is Elon Musk's ex-girlfriend and the mother of two of his children. But it's a dangerous wave to ride. Withhold too many invites, and the thrill of the new network risks wearing off before most users even get the chance to try it out. That, in part, feels like the cleanest description of what happened to Clubhouse, the buzzy live-audio app that exploded, and then imploded, all within the span of one of the UK's interminable lockdowns. Give out invites too freely, though, and you lose the benefit of scarcity while still making it awkward for new users to actually sign up. Even the sweet spot has its own problems: users on Bluesky are fans of its unique culture, the outcome of numerous technical flaws combining with a fanbase made up of a concentrated clique of brainwormed posters. But that culture can't last. Even if the app's developers were to impose new restrictions on who can get invitations to protect the network's culture, a social network with seven million users is inherently going to be

different to one with 70,000, and there's no meaningful way for Bluesky to stay small and thrive. DINO So far, everything important about Bluesky is purely cultural. It's a hip app with strong network effects among cool former Twitter users. But the service itself has bolder ambitions: it was, as I said, built to be a decentralised replacement for Twitter, and those goals still exist. The app is built on top of software, at AT Protocol, which is designed to allow for anyone to run their own server, compatible with Bluesky. At the moment, that's mostly theoretical: there's one AT Protocol user client, the Bluesky app, and one AT protocol server, the Bluesky server. But the goal is to open it up, and achieve the initial goal of decentralisation. I trust the Bluesky team to get that far. But I have my doubts that the service will thrive with the decentralisation being anything more than a theoretical option for hardcore users, or a poison pill to prevent a repeat of the Elon Musk takeover. Why? Because of the elephant in the room: Mastodon. The AT protocol isn't the first try at building a decentralised replacement for Twitter. Mastodon, which is built on top of ActivityPub, came first. And the service has had substantial success, with more than 10m registered accounts across the "fediverse", the loose collections of servers and services that makes up the network. But Mastodon has alienated many, in large part because of that very decentralisation. Until earlier this month, the first choice presented to users of the official app was to pick a server – a choice that has little immediate consequence, with few reasons for a novice to care, but one that feels weighty and momentous. Days after Bluesky went viral, an update was pushed to default users into the largest server, mastodon.social, but not before service had established the reputation of being hard to use. Bluesky won't have missed that, and so it seems poised to remain decentralised in name only, focusing on usability over complete freedom. The two services have now set themselves up as rival camps. Each is drawing increasingly crude stereotypes of users of the other service – Mastodon is for people who run Linux on the desktop and scold people for not strictly hewing to unwritten ethics, while Bluesky is for techbros and clout chasers who don't have any principles other than being where the cool kids are and will return to Twitter when the buzz dies down. But in the end, they're on the same side: whichever one Elon Musk isn't. Oh, and Twitter's still on fire Meanwhile Musk announced a new chief executive for Twitter, handling business operations while he focuses on tech and product directions. This means, in rough terms, that Elon Musk will be operating as chief technology operator, a position that normally reports to the chief executive, who in turn reports to the executive chair, a role currently held by … Elon Musk. Who would take such a job? Linda Yaccarino, the head of global advertising at NBCUniversal until the day her new position was announced. From our report: Musk added on Friday that he looked forward to working with Yaccarino on transforming Twitter into X, the "everything app" along the lines of China's multi-faceted WeChat. Musk did not name Yaccarino in the initial post, but on Friday, NBCUniversal, the entertainment conglomerate behind the NBC TV network and the Universal film studio, announced that Yaccarino had left the business without revealing her onward destination. Musk's confirmation came soon afterwards. Unsurprisingly for someone taking this job, Yaccarino appears to be a Musk fan: She interviewed Musk on stage at an advertising conference in Miami last month, in which she told the Tesla CEO that some advertisers "have a challenge with your points of view", to which Musk replied that some of his tweets should be taken with a "grain of salt". Yaccarino also said in the interview: "If freedom of speech, as he says, is the bedrock of this country, I'm not sure there's anyone in this room who could disagree with that." In April, Yaccarino tweeted a clip from an interview between Musk and the comedian Bill Maher on the HBO show Real Time With Bill Maher, in which she tagged Musk with an "on fire" emoji. In the clip, Musk is asked by Maher about the "woke mind virus", prompting Musk to state that the world needed to be "cautious" about anything that is "anti-meritocratic" and "results in the suppression of free speech". It's for the best that she supports her new boss and underling, because within hours of the news breaking that she was about to run Twitter, she became the site's main character. Yaccarino is also the chair of the World Economic Forum's Future of Work taskforce, and a member of the WEF's media, entertainment and culture industry governors steering committee. Detailing the overlap between the WEF and various conspiracy theories is too much for the third item in this week's newsletter, but suffice to say that if you have a blue check on Twitter and a strong fear that 15-minute cities are cover for a woke mind virus that will force us all to live in pods and eat bugs, then someone from WEF running a social network is probably your worst nightmare. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday