

'Let that sink in!' The 13 tweets that tell the story of Elon Musk's turbulent first year at Twitter (or X)

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A year ago this week, when he completed the purchase of Twitter for \$44bn, Elon Musk tweeted “the bird is freed”. Billionaires like nothing more than casting themselves as popular liberators, but the acquisition fitted the pattern of his ever-expanding empire. Musk has colonised areas of the economy from which public funding and regulation have been in retreat. His carmaker, Tesla, is shaping the future of transport; SpaceX, meanwhile, has in many ways replaced Nasa on the final frontier (so far this year it has launched 75 spacecraft). Musk told himself and the world that he had acquired Twitter (now renamed X) to create “a common digital town square, where a wide range of beliefs can be debated in a healthy manner”. The subtext of that naive homily was: what’s the point in being the one of richest men in the world if you can’t corner the market in free speech? One year on, Musk has, step by step, reshaped his platform in his own erratic image. The traditional wisdom of Twitter was: “Each day on Twitter there is one main character. The goal is never to be it.” Musk has inverted that message. The site’s algorithm ensured that his voice is the most prominent on a daily basis (he has 160.5 million followers). When he took over, the anxiety was that he would remove the checks and balances that had been implemented in response to the crisis in American democracy seen after the election of Donald Trump, and in populist governments across the world. Social media had accepted its culpability in profiting from division. In the event Musk has, in plain sight – and to an often sycophantic audience, mesmerised by his billions – doubled down on that fear, restoring a platform for conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers, personally amplifying attacks on what he delights in calling “legacy” (ie fact-checked) media and public servants, implementing strategies that amplify the set of corrosive attitudes pushed by Trump and the American right: the demonising of refugees, the imaginary “LGBT” agenda to sexualise children, the “war on woke”. Musk’s tweeting activity features more rocket launches than a North Korean propaganda film but, read collectively over the course of this year, also delivers insights into the ever-hardening politics of a man whose unnerving ambition is to own “the world’s consciousness”. 26 October 2022 ‘Let that sink in!’ Musk arrived at Twitter HQ in San Francisco carrying a bathroom sink. The tech bro “joke” was that tech bro “jokes” and much else besides were now allowed on “liberated” Twitter. The implications of that new less-than-serious ownership were established a couple of days later when Musk replied to a post by Hillary Clinton that expressed outrage at conspiracy theories surrounding the brutal attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of the speaker of the House of Representatives. Musk intervened to amplify those theories, linking to an article on a notorious fake news site, the Santa Monica Observer. How we chuckled. 20 November ‘The people have spoken. Trump will be reinstated. Vox Populi, Vox Dei’ Musk began unbanning Twitter accounts that had been removed after the 6 January insurrection, beginning, symbolically, with former

president Trump's. During his first visit to Twitter HQ, he had insisted that there was no truth in rumours that he would lay off 75% of its 7,500 staff. He was true to his word. He laid off about 80%, including the vast majority of those who policed the site for hate speech and conspiracy. He also dissolved the trust and safety council, an advisory group created in 2016 to address problems of child exploitation, suicide and self-harm on the platform. During that month's elections in Brazil, in which misinformation fomented another insurrection against a democratic result, Musk was reportedly making ad hoc calls on guideline breaches himself. 12 December 'The woke mind virus is either defeated or nothing else matters' Until about 2020 Musk had supported Democratic causes: he donated money to the Obama and Hillary Clinton presidential campaigns. That loose conviction seems to have been undone by Covid restrictions. "This is fascist," he said. "This is not democratic. Give people back their goddam freedom." The rightward shift in his politics coincided with the fact that his eldest child, Vivian, had come out as a trans woman (she changed her surname in 2022, saying in a courtroom filing, "I no longer wish to be related to my biological father in any way, shape or form"). Musk blamed the breakdown in their relationship on "communist" indoctrination at a private school she attended in Los Angeles. Among documents disclosed during Musk's acquisition of Twitter were texts from his ex-wife, British actor Talulah Riley, which urged: "Please do something to fight woke-ism. I will do anything to help! xx." 15 January 2023 'Instagram makes people depressed & Twitter makes people angry. Which is better?' In his authorised biography, Walter Isaacson suggested that that Musk had misunderstood Twitter. "He thought of it as a technology company," Isaacson wrote, "when in fact it is an advertising medium based on human emotions and relationships." This tweet gestured toward that misconception. Musk, who identifies himself as having Asperger syndrome, struggles to understand why the rest of humanity does not share his philosophy of infinite possibility. The vitriol he monetises on Twitter appears a constant challenge to his \$250bn optimism. One defence, as the Wall Street Journal subsequently reported, was that Musk was self-medicating with ketamine, the horse-tranquilliser party drug, whose side-effects include disassociation and hallucination. In response to the article, Musk tweeted that from what he'd seen with friends, "ketamine taken occasionally is a better option" than prescribed antidepressants. Eight million people viewed that endorsement. 3 February 'Starting today, Twitter will share ad revenue with creators for ads that appear in their reply threads' Amid reports that Twitter was losing \$4m a day, Musk launched a plan to boost advertising revenue by encouraging users to subscribe and create content in order to access a minuscule share of profits. This Uber-style model of maximum revenue with minimum responsibility exposed the flaw of "citizen journalism". In the absence of any viable system of fact-checking or transparent accountability, the model seemed inevitably weighted towards the kind of extreme opinion and unhinged content that guaranteed the most hits and likes. 28 March 'Trying my best for the humans' Musk appears to be driven by a sense, nurtured in a lifetime of video-game playing, that he alone can save the world from climate change or AI catastrophe. At the centre of that belief is his Mars mission and the dream of a "multiplanet civilisation". One mantra that emerges from Isaacson's book is: "If I don't make decisions, we die." Thousands of faithful followers on Twitter love nothing more than reinforcing those cultish fantasies. This tweet came in response to a message describing Musk as "one of the most selfless of humans". Isaacson believes that Musk wanted to buy Twitter because he had been bullied as a kid both by his father and at school and "now he could own the playground". 9 April 'All news is to some degree propaganda. Let people decide for themselves' Musk undermined the authority of independent news sources with the mission and resources to provide accurate journalism – the BBC, NPR in America – by adding the line "state-sponsored media" to their posts, grouping them with blatant propaganda from Russia Today and the Chinese government. Though that policy was revised after protest, the mission, it seemed, was to give all information equal weight. How people could "decide for themselves" what was true from that avalanche of competing, unsourced news was not explained. 16 May 'Soros reminds me of Magneto' By comparing the investor George Soros, to Magneto, the supervillain in X-Men comic books, Musk referred to the antisemitic tropes of the alt-right. When investigative journalist Brian Krassenstein argued that "Soros, a Holocaust survivor [like Magneto], gets attacked nonstop for his good intentions" Musk suggested that Soros "hates humanity". He did not disclose that Soros Fund Management had the day before sold its entire stake in Tesla. 20 June 'I'm up for a cage match if he is lol' When Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg launched a competitor to Twitter called Threads, Musk challenged him to a cage fight. Zuckerberg, who reportedly spends his leisure time practising jiu-jitsu, accepted. Musk has so far not come up with a date for the fight, claiming a back injury. The juvenile exchange was a reminder of the words Musk whispered into the ear of his first wife Justine, by her account, at their wedding reception dance: "I'm the Alpha in this relationship." If the cage fight ever does take place, it is to be hoped that no one anywhere tunes in to the livestream. 23 July 'X goes live' Musk has had a superstitious obsession with the letter X since he invested in the online bank X.com. The letter now features in all his companies and is part of the ludicrous name of his son with the artist Grimes: X Æ A-12. Rebranding Twitter – and dropping the blue bird which was among the most effective symbols in corporate history – was, at best, an example of his unlimited faith in his own instincts. The sinister X branding was claimed as the first step toward his long-term goal of creating a universal "everything app" on which the world would communicate, bank and shop. If Musk had wanted to look like a real-life Bond villain, he could hardly have been more explicit. 25 August 'Next-level' Trump signalled his return to Twitter by posting the mugshot from his booking at Fulton County Jail on charges of election interference. Musk retweeted that with the words "Next-level". To give a flavour of Twitter in the coming election year, he also heavily promoted an interview between sacked Fox News provocateur Tucker Carlson and Trump, which was said to have had 265m views. Carlson has been interviewing a series of far-right leaders for X, including Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Argentina's extreme populist candidate Javier

Milei. "You have to be prepared and fight the culture wars every day ..." Milei told him. "Very interesting talk that goes far beyond Argentina," Musk tweeted. 29 September: 'Went to Eagle Pass border crossing to see what's really going on' Pre-empting another Trump campaign, Musk spent much of September in a cowboy hat, concentrating the anxieties of his followers on the porous southern border, by livestreaming reports of illegal immigration at Eagle Pass in Texas. His stilted vox pops with local sheriffs were punctuated with frequent appeals to his screen: "Is this working?" The reports suggested that he really wanted to be a local radio reporter when he grew up, but still had a way to go. 8 October 'For following the war in real-time, @WarMonitors and @sentdefender are good' Just how much Musk had to learn about news was shown by this since-deleted tweet after the 7 October Hamas atrocities. The recommended sites were both quickly shown to have spread fake news and @WarMonitors had made antisemitic comments. In the following days, X was flooded with unverifiable content, which overwhelmed its new "community notes" feature, (in which an approved group of users adds fact-checked commentary to unreliable tweets). Musk was reduced to posting lame threats to sites he had promoted: "Please use maximally accurate words or I must withdraw my recommendation to follow your account." The war sharpened focus on the EU's new Digital Services Act, which has powers to hold social media to account for failure to take steps to prevent the spread of misinformation. Unlike Facebook and Google, Musk has refused to sign X up to the code of practice, but that will not protect it from huge fines or a potential blackout. On Wednesday, Thierry Breton, the commissioner responsible for the act, contacted Musk, demanding that he contact Europol to explain the breaches. The entrepreneur was otherwise engaged promoting his favourite new T-shirt, which asked: "What would Orwell think?" No doubt he would have seen Musk coming.