

With DeSantis campaign event, Musk seeks to shore up a sinking Twitter

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The news that Ron DeSantis will launch his presidential campaign during a live Twitter appearance with Elon Musk marks the tech billionaire's latest attempts to shore up engagement with the social network at a moment of crisis for the company. The event – which will take place Wednesday on Twitter Spaces, a live stream feature that is often broadcast at the top of Twitter's feed – was confirmed by Musk on Tuesday afternoon. Speaking at the Wall Street Journal CEO Summit, Musk called the Florida governor's decision "groundbreaking" and said it won't be the last political event that Twitter will host. When asked if he plans to interview other candidates, particularly Democrats, Musk said "absolutely". "It's important that Twitter have both the reality and perception of a level playing field as a place where all voices are heard," he said. "This will be the first time something like this will be happening on social media with real time questions and answers. Let's see what happens." For Musk, the upshot of DeSantis's appearance will be increased visibility for Twitter at a moment when the company's relevance is dwindling. The social network has floundered since Musk took over, rolling out mass layoffs and launching new projects amid runaway losses. Musk previously claimed the company was losing \$4m per day and undertook massive cost-cutting measures, including firing more than half the company's workforce. In the months since, Twitter under Musk's leadership has continued to struggle – with advertisers fleeing the increasingly unstable platform and the company facing lawsuits for not paying rent in multiple office locations around the world. Increasing outages have suggested the platform's basic infrastructure is struggling amid the growing job cuts. In an attempt to make the flailing platform more profitable, Musk launched a subscription service for verification that largely failed. He also ventured into journalistic endeavors with the Twitter Files – an exposé project published on the platform that he said is now dead. Musk has also spoken publicly about his desire to turn Twitter into an "everything app", similar to China's WeChat, that would roll social media in with payments and other services. Now, Musk may be courting additional revenue streams by platforming conservatives. Earlier this month, the former Fox News host Tucker Carlson announced he would be reviving his popular show on the site, although Musk said on his own account that there was no deal signed between the platform and Carlson. Musk told the audience at Tuesday's event that the Twitter event does not amount to his endorsement of DeSantis or any candidate. But while Musk has described himself as a moderate who has voted for Democrats in the past, he has been vocal about his disdain for Democrats and progressives, actively participating in the far-right's culture war against progressivism. His tweeted missives are often in line with major Republican talking points – decrying Covid restrictions and denigrating the media. In November, he urged his followers to vote for a Republican Congress. As DeSantis rolls back trans rights, including access to gender affirming care, Musk

has echoed Republican misinformation equating gender affirming care and puberty blockers with sterilization. Under his management, Twitter has reinstated the accounts of far-right organizers and neo-Nazis, as well as rightwing politicians including Donald Trump, who had previously violated the social media company's rules. Speaking on Tuesday, Musk said his vision is for Twitter to act as a "public town square where more and more organizations ... make announcements". For the billionaire, ever the provocative tweeter, that public town square must come with limited constraints on what is said. "I'm not going to mitigate what I say because that would be inhibiting freedom of speech," Musk said, answering a question about his recent controversial tweets about George Soros. "That doesn't mean you have to agree with what I say. For those who would advocate censorship ... if you succeed in that, it's only a matter of time before it gets turned on you."