

# TechScape: Bluesky opens up to the world – but can anything really replace Twitter?

Publication Date: 2024-02-13

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Section: Technology

Tags: Technology, TechScape newsletter, Social media, Bluesky, Threads, X, Digital media, Internet, newsletters

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/feb/13/bluesky-twitter-jack-dorsey-social-network>



Last week, Bluesky opened up its doors. After a year in an invite-only closed beta, anyone who wants it can now sign up for an account with only an email address. Even if the value of an invitation had lessened somewhat in recent months (I have five sitting unused, and not for want of trying), there was clearly some pent-up demand. In just two days, the service has seen more than a million new signups. For comparison, it took Bluesky more than three months from the release of its iOS app last February until it hit 70,000 users. That slow growth has been a mixed blessing for Bluesky. On the one hand, the beta has done its job, allowing the company to iterate its service based on feedback from a smaller, if no less hardcore, base of users than it would otherwise have. In the past year, it has built up a suite of moderation tools that allow for its “decentralised” approach to social networking (where users are allowed to voluntarily opt in or out of content such as nudity, violence and hate speech); it’s launched on Android and the web; and it’s created a coherent visual identity, adopting a butterfly as its own version of Twitter’s bird. Elon Musk’s site, meanwhile, has correspondingly destroyed its own visual shorthand, replacing some but not all Twitter branding with a double-struck **𝕏**. But the slow burn also meant that Bluesky didn’t have a true moment in the sun. For the past year, I’ve heard a fairly common refrain from new users: a rush of excitement at being allowed access to the service, followed by the deflating realisation that it has less content than Twitter had at its peak. Sometimes, that’s a trick of the memory. A Bluesky feed following 50 users is going to be less busy than a Twitter feed following 500, and the days when everyone they followed could fit in a double-decker bus are a distant past for many power users of the latter service. Many long-time Twitter users won’t remember what it was like to have a quiet feed or need to spot new people to follow, and those things can cause people to bounce off a new social network like Bluesky just as they caused so many to stumble while signing up for Twitter itself. (That is why the “people you may know” feature on Facebook so uncannily perceptive: the social network has always known that the biggest hurdle isn’t getting someone to sign up, but getting them to follow enough other users that they stick around after.) Even if you do the hard graft to build up a Bluesky account with a reasonably full address book, the service can’t possibly match up to the rosy memories of Twitter at its peak. Sure, it’s a similar enough experience to stave off the craving for the real thing, but not compelling enough to drive you back for more. You post; no one responds; you log off and touch grass. All of this, of course, is talking about Bluesky as a nascent social network. But the company doesn’t see it that way. Chief executive Jay Graber gave some interviews to mark the grand opening. Here she is speaking to Wired: We weren’t using invites to try to be exclusive. We were using them to manage growth while we built out what is essentially a foundation, the rails for this new kind of distributed network. We had to build the app protocol beneath Bluesky, the AT Protocol, that lets different developers, companies, or people come in and modify their

experiences. Some of it is going to be rolling out soon. When it's finished, the vision for Bluesky is to hover somewhere between a straight-up replacement for Twitter and a fully decentralised service like Mastodon, the second of the big three post-Twitter social networks: like Mastodon, the technology underpinning Bluesky should eventually allow your account to outlast the company that created it, but unlike Mastodon, Bluesky is less eager to foreground the technological differences between it and Twitter, with the vast majority of users remaining on the official app and service for the foreseeable future. And then there's Threads. Meta's Twitter clone is, unquestionably, the biggest of the three by user count alone, but it's also barely made a ripple in the wider culture. The site's policy of suppressing political content – it won't get algorithmic promotion, according to Threads' platform safety policies – doesn't help matters. There are parallels with earlier periods of online culture, here: Twitter dominated discussion even while having a fraction of the size of Facebook, and TikTok does the same despite the vastly larger number of users on YouTube. Elizabeth Lopatto, at the Verge, explained the disconnect with a taxonomy so spot-on that I can't do anything but quote her at length: The silent majority of every successful text-based social media site is lurkers. These are sane, normal people with sane, normal lives ... The influencer is building a business. They are making #content ... The commenter is trying to have a conversation with another human being. They are hoping, however misguidedly, to have a meaningful interaction online ... The reply guy can be thought of as the most important subclass of commenter; they are specific. They are usually interacting with or on behalf of a favored internet user ... Finally, we have the poster, sometimes referred to as a poaster. The poster is required for every social network to function. The issue facing all Twitter replacements is that the balance is off. Threads is massive, but its user base is lurkers and influencers. Like being in the audience of a Marvel movie, you may consume some professionally produced content, but you're certainly not going to form any lasting memories. For the past year, Bluesky has been pure posters, locked in a room with each other, deprived of much of the dopamine that they need to maintain their frenetic energy. And Mastodon is a community of commenters and reply guys, decentralised to the point that it's possible to have a nice chat, but difficult to discern a conversation arising from within. Opening up Bluesky, then, could be the first step to restoring some of that balance. Posters cannot survive on posters alone. They – we – need lurkers. Join us, or we'll have to touch grass. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday.