

Twitter takeover: how a year of Elon Musk rendered the platform useless

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Over the last year, we've watched with horrified fascination as Elon Musk, the world's richest man, rained deathblow after deathblow upon a social network that once served as the global town square for the world's most influential people, brands and institutions. Since buying Twitter for \$44bn in October 2022, Musk has fired thousands of staffers, including those working in content moderation, trust and safety, and public policy. He's opened up verification, once reserved for notable users, to anyone that pays an \$8 subscription fee, making it impossible to tell who's real and who's not. He's blown up messaging, restricting the platform's ability to privately text nearly any user to only those who pay. He's booted journalists he doesn't like from the service, labeled NPR as "state-affiliated media", throttled traffic to news sites, reinstated previously-banned white nationalists, resurrected Donald Trump's account, unleashed threats and harassment on former staff members, killed the best bots, feuded with the Anti-Defamation League, deprecated headlines, toyed with putting the whole site behind a paywall, installed a CEO who will forever be known for a disastrous first public interview, and destroyed one of the world's most recognizable brand names – Twitter – by changing it to X. The result, one year later, is a platform in the throes of enshittification. X now resembles a creature from *The Walking Dead* – rotting, dangerous and a shadow of its former self. Under Musk's reign, its usage is reportedly shrinking. Advertisers are pulling back; users are signing off or decamping to rivals; and the town square that was once the world's collective pulse, is now on fire. "The word I am looking for is 'trashy'," said a former Twitter reliability engineer who requested to remain anonymous for fear of Musk's famed litigiousness. "Musk's Twitter is trashy. My feed is filled with trash. The ads between those tweets are also trash." The ongoing war between Hamas and Israel is the latest geopolitical crisis to expose X's putrid guts. Hours after Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October, X was awash in misinformation. Accounts with thousands of followers passed off footage from military video games as scenes from the conflict. Screenshots of fake White House statements promising billions of dollars in aid to Israel went viral. Far-right influencers juiced X's algorithms by pumping out endless streams of dangerous falsehoods for profit and engagement. Musk amplified it by recommending people follow two known antisemitic accounts to keep up with the latest Israel-Palestine news. Devoid of moderation teams, X's official safety account suggested that people rely on crowdsourced Community Notes to figure out truth from lies (it didn't work). Nearly two weeks after Hamas attacked, X suddenly removed The New York Times' verification page for a few hours and then restored it with no explanation. "The only reason I am still on Twitter is because I want to see what's going to happen to it," the reliability engineer said. A recent analysis by NewsGuard showed that X's verified users, who had paid for their blue checks, were responsible for 74% of Israel and Hamas war-related falsehoods that went viral on the platform. Before she was one of the thousands of

employees Musk laid off from Twitter at the end of last year, Melissa Ingle worked on a team responsible for civic integrity and tackling the spread of political misinformation on the platform. She also wrote algorithms to moderate harmful content. Ingle, who is now a senior data scientist at an IT company, said she couldn't believe how bad these problems are now. "The things that we were protecting against then are exactly the things that we're seeing all over the site right now," she said. "When it comes to political misinformation, you have to be on top of that stuff at all times, or it just spreads everywhere." Twitter once played a crucial role in the Arab Spring and in amplifying the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. In countries like India where freedom of expression has increasingly come under threat from a Hindu nationalist government, the social network formerly known as Twitter served as a much-needed space for dissent, birthing a new class of influencers who questioned the country's government when mainstream media did not. But now, X runs on the whims of a billionaire and is among the worst places on the internet to keep up with news or make an impact. Instead of showing you posts from people you follow, the platform now defaults to a "For You" mode filled with grifters, recycled memes, idiots, AI hustlers, cat videos, car accidents and far-right influencers. Sensible, informative posts appear to get virtually no engagement – links are explicitly deprioritized, stifling the news while viral garbage floats to the top, thanks to an algorithmic tweak that Musk says optimizes for time spent on the platform above anything else. Like most journalists around the world, I used Twitter perhaps a bit too much. For years, it was one of the best places to find new voices, network and make new sources. And even though it didn't drive a significant amount of traffic to stories, no other platform got you the digital clout that Twitter did. Of course, it wasn't without its problems. It struggled with hate speech and harassment issues and moved too slowly to fix them. In emerging markets in particular, these problems were even worse. Like other major social media platforms, Twitter was slow to invest in local language moderation outside of the US. And its senior leadership was shockingly ignorant of cultural dynamics that fuelled hate speech outside the US. But there were still moments when it shone, like when it boxed with with nationalist governments to protect its users' freedom of speech. In March 2021, a deadly second wave of Covid-19 rolled across my home, India, weeks after the BJP government declared that it had defeated the pandemic. Some estimates say nearly 5 million people died. New Delhi, India's capital, broke down almost entirely – makeshift pyres burned alongside the river as cremation grounds ran out of space and hospital chains ran out of oxygen supplies. Bodies, bloated beyond recognition, floated serenely down the Ganges. The government tried its best to hide the human cost of that wave. But anyone scrolling through Twitter could see the nightmare unfolding in real time. Our timelines filled with pictures and videos from sources we could trust and pleas for oxygen, medicines and supplies from people, hospitals and even embassies amplified by thousands of retweets as people scrambled to keep each other alive. It was horrible, but it was all true. Now, I can't trust much of anything that crosses my timeline. The community of journalists I was a part of has evaporated and decamped for smaller alternatives that have yet to live up to their potential. I have spent this year mourning the loss of that special space we had, despite the endless problems like hate speech and harassment that we also complained about constantly. A former employee once called Twitter a "honeypot for assholes", a reputation that the company tried to fix for years before the world's richest man snapped it up. Now, after a year of being owned by Elon Musk, only the assholes reign supreme.