

TechScape: Threads and Bluesky need to figure out what they want to be

Publication Date: 2023-10-17

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Section: Technology

Tags: Bluesky, TechScape newsletter, Threads, Elon Musk, Jack Dorsey, Social media, X, Blogging, newsletters

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/17/threads-and-bluesky-need-to-figure-out-what-they-want-to-be>



Every time Elon Musk does something bad, you can see an influx of new users to Bluesky – one of the many social media sites to pop up as a potential Twitter/X alternative. The platform, still invite-only, has more than 1.5 million users but it is slowly growing. A website called Twexit, which tracks the exodus of users from Twitter to Bluesky, has noted spikes of people activating their invite codes in the past couple of months. In the year since Musk took over Twitter, there have been peaks of new users registering that coincide with when Twitter became X, when Musk announced the block feature would be removed and when he floated the idea of charging users a subscription fee. Interestingly, there was no bounce when X removed the headlines from news articles shared on the site, and so far there hasn't been an influx of users horrified at the misinformation and violent content on X from the Israel-Hamas war. There has, however, been a steady increase in people posting daily on Bluesky since 19 September, but it hovers at around 10% of those who have registered accounts (around 150,000). Similarly, in the past week Platformer's Casey Newton and others have noticed that Threads, Meta's own answer to Twitter, appears to be picking up again, after a massive decline on initial excitement after the launch. "One of the ways Threads has felt more lively in the past week is that its users are complaining about it more," Newton wrote on the Verge. It's mostly just a vibe based on the new followers people are getting, but Similarweb, which tracked Threads's sharp decline after launch, has recorded a slight bounce in the past two weeks based on Android app data. A recent thread from CNN asking for journalists to make themselves known on the platform received more than 2,000 replies and more than 6,000 likes. It's still modest compared to some popular accounts on Twitter, but shows there is appetite for Threads to become the professionalised place for news, at least. It's not clear, though, what the organisations running Threads or Bluesky actually want their platforms to be. As Newton points out, it wouldn't be hard for Threads to introduce lists and hashtags and trending topics, along with a TweetDeck-like interface to give the media what they want. Except it's been somewhat explicit (and not surprising from Meta) that they're not designing it to be a place for news, and Meta has never reliably given the media what they want. Considering the fight Meta had in Australia over the news media bargaining code to pay for content, and a battle in Canada over similar legislation, it's hard to see them luring news on to Threads. All the news that's 'too risky' to print last week, the head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri, who is also running Threads, said that Meta is "not anti-news", but it won't be promoted. "News is clearly already on Threads. People can share news; people can follow accounts that share news. We're not going to get in the way of any either. But, we're also not going to amplify news on the platform," he said. "To do so would be too risky given the maturity of the platform, the downsides of over-promising, and the stakes." Twitter was never a big

driver of traffic to journalism sites. (NPR last week revealed it had only cost the company 1% of its traffic in the six months since it left the platform.) But it was useful for breaking news – tracking people on the ground in emerging crises or news events, and keeping track of reporting as it happened. What's keeping X alive for now is that its rivals are still bare-bones versions of Twitter. Bluesky is exclusive and doesn't have video, Threads doesn't have hashtags, and neither platform has direct messaging functions. (But Threads introduced voice posts and an edit function in the last week, so things are moving quickly.) I can see a time when Threads becomes the default professional website for news where the politicians and journalists all are, while Bluesky becomes the site for communities, dank shitposting, and all things NSFW. But it's not quite there yet. For those who are after breaking news quickly, many of the government accounts and politicians are still mostly on X and not on Threads or Bluesky. Until there is a more substantial shift elsewhere, those of us in the news business will still have to wade through the unreliability and increasing toxicity of X. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday