The Twitter saga shows the importance of a multi-platform social media ecosystem

By Sam Spiller , issued by Clockwork   28 Nov 2022

Since concluding his acquisition of Twitter in October, Elon Musk has ushered in a wave of disruption that shows no sign of dissipating anytime soon.

In the month that followed, Musk laid off thousands of employees, leaving many essential departments and teams gutted. The site has now twice delayed the rollout of its new $8-a-month blue check verification service citing account impersonation concerns. Former US President Donald Trump's account was reinstated following a Twitter poll, an act that conflicted with claims from Musk that such decisions would be left up to a content moderation council. All of this has spooked both advertisers and users. The future of the platform is in limbo.

So, what's the lesson here? Putting aside political sentiments and whatever one may think of Musk, the situation calls for real introspection. Introspection on the purpose of social media, the importance of online communities and the kind of online spaces brands and consumers congregate within. All this uncertainty puts the importance of a diversified online ecosystem into focus. Instead of walled social media gardens, we need options, options that cater to our content, communication and information preferences.

The value of integrity and moderation

As much as Musk reports that Twitter is hitting new records, there can be no denying the level of brand damage that both it and other brands have suffered since the acquisition. Users and advertisers feel alienated, unsure of how the site will remain not just popular but also how it sustains its "stable" state of being.

Granted, it's still early days. Musk could ultimately move Twitter's business and operating model away from being dependent on advertiser revenue. But damage is still being inflicted in real time. Just recently, following another Twitter user poll, Musk announced the site would offer "general amnesty" to suspended accounts, a move that has set off alarm bells.

With curatorship comes responsibility. No one wants their name appearing next to a 240-character racist rant or pictures of child pornography, and from a business side, that shows.
Marketing professor and entrepreneur Scott Galloway notes a correlation between company growth and shareholder value, and additional moderation, going so far as to declare Twitter is successful because of moderation and not despite it. All this points to a platform that scrutinises user-posted content as being preferable. And let's be very clear: regardless of what people may argue, moderation and censorship are not the same thing.

One app to rule them all?

We must not underestimate the power of social media and how it's integrated into our daily lives. The medium has evolved beyond just being useful for instant messaging friends and family. Case in point, TikTok is now a search engine, with young people using the app's algorithm to source information, a development that forms part of a greater trend in digital transformation.

These platforms are important to people for varying purposes but they also draw specific people and demographics that help manifest their unique communities, forums and groups. Reddit is a very different animal to Twitter in terms of moderation and engagement mechanism, so different people are drawn to it for different reasons. The same goes for TikTok and Facebook and everyone else. Multiple and diverse platforms can also encourage innovation, leading to new products and services that capture the imagination of their users.

By relegating themselves to just one platform, brands miss out on new communities and methods of interaction. They disregard opportunities to expand their digital footprint. The social media experience is far from perfect for anyone, but as a practical source of communication, news and entertainment, not to mention a critical tool for journalists and activists worldwide, it's a resource we must be grateful for and take care of.

Like and subscribe for the future

Musk has inadvertently kickstarted a race to discover the next big and trendy online hangout. Open-source networking service Mastodon got a head start when it experienced a dramatic surge in user signups following the Twitter acquisition. Just recently, little-known app Hive shot into the top 20 list on the US App Store. It's too early to tell if Twitter has permanently damaged its reputation to the point of abandonment. After weeks of watching people declare or imply their imminent departure from the site, we have yet to see any kind of major exodus.

Twitter will not vanish overnight. Musk paid way too much for it for that to happen. Twitter and what's happening to it in terms of its user base is also not indicative of any world-changing social or cultural trend. As of Q2 2022, Twitter's number of monetisable daily active users reached 238 million. Closer to home, South Africa had only 2.85 million users in early 2022. That means there are many humans and entities across South Africa and the rest of the world that are not on this site.

But whatever happens, brands and users alike need to keep an open mind regarding the platforms they use. Not just what they want platforms to do or how they regulate themselves, but what they want from them and the people they want to connect with. Whatever comes next, we will always have options in that regard.

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