Elon Musk Is Not the Enemy

. . . but his Twitter reform plan is unlikely to succeed.

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Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter is not yet finalized, and in fact now seems to be on hold. Nonetheless, the buzz about what this prospective change in the ownership of the social media giant portends for life online has continued—particularly with Musk's recent announcement that he would reverse Donald Trump's perma-ban from the site. The buzz says a great deal about the politics of the social media, on both the left and the right—and what it says isn't particularly flattering to either side.

Ever since Musk started moving for a Twitter buyout last month, much of the commentary has treated this initiative as part of a right-wing insurgency against perceived left-wing social media bias. (The proximate cause for the Tesla CEO's serious exploration of Twitter ownership was apparently the suspension of the account of the *Babylon Bee*, the conservative satire site, for a tweet naming Health and Human Services Secretary Rachel Levine, a transgender woman, "Man of the Year.") Yet Musk's politics are not particularly right-wing. At least going from his public statements and actions, Musk, unlike his former competitor-turned-colleague Peter Thiel, doesn't aspire to empower a peculiar blend of ultra-libertarian and ultra-right politics. In June 2017, Musk stepped down from Trump's two White House-commissioned business advisory councils, along with then-Disney CEO Bob Iger, because of Trump's decision to withdraw from the Obama-era Paris climate accords; prior to that, Musk had justified his participation in the councils by claiming that he and other business leaders could do good by helping shape the White House agenda.

At that point, Musk was still in the good graces of the mainstream media. The moment this changed, apparently, was in May 2018, when Musk responded to negative media reports on Tesla by using Twitter as a platform to attack the media's credibility.

It's very likely that Musk was being thin-skinned and trying to deflect from accurate coverage of the company's problems. Nonetheless, the thin-skin problem wasn't on his side alone. In the era of Trump and right-wing trolls, there was an impulse to cast any swipes at the media as giving aid and comfort to the Troll-in-Chief's war on "fake news" and "enemies of the people." This exchange between *Verge* transportation editor Andrew Hawkins and the embattled Musk was typical:

Needless to say, the counterattacks from the media had the classic Streisand effect of drawing more attention to Musk's attacks, politicizing them in the process. Musk made some undoubted stumbles, but at the time he was still very anxious to maintain his own mainstream credibility; when he inadvertently recommended a media criticism piece from a site affiliated with the sex

cult NXIVM, he promptly deleted it after the shady provenance of the website was pointed out. Yet for all the deserved criticism of Musk, his media adversaries engaged in their own below-the-belt tactics, as when the *Daily Beast* published a piece by science journalist Erin Biba claiming that female journalists who criticized Musk—such as herself—were subject to particularly vicious and sexist abuse by Twitter "MuskBros," with unmistakable innuendo of misogyny-by-association—despite the absence of any evidence that Musk himself had either engaged in or encouraged any such abuse. (For that matter, Biba's only proof that female journalists were singled out for harassment was *one* male journalist who said he didn't get much blowback despite going after Musk; such gender-based narratives tend to rely on skewed and cherry-picked evidence.) Around the same time, an anti-Semitism accusation surfaced as well. After *Verge* co-founder Joshua Topolsky responded to Musk's proposal for a media rating site by asking, "Do you think it's in the interest of powerful people to A: support a free press that exposes their lies, or B: tear it down so their lies are easier to tell?" Musk tweeted back asking "Who do you think *owns* the press? Hello." In context, as I pointed out in the thread, it was quite clear that Musk meant "powerful people." Yet numerous people, including journalists such as NBC News reporter Ben Collins, promptly jumped in to insinuate that Musk was hinting at the "Jews own the media" trope:

So did alt-right trolls who jumped gleefully on the bandwagon, though it was hard to tell whether they were drawn to Musk's initial tweet or to the accusatory responses. It didn't help that Topolsky eventually deleted all his tweets in the thread, stripping away the context. A year later, Collins, who had been the first person to pounce on Musk's tweet, started a thread pointing out that neo-Nazis and other baddies were still circulating it out of context and suggesting that Musk was at fault for not removing it (even though the example Collins gave was a screenshot which Musk could not have stopped anyone from using).

In short, I think that Musk's later online persona—plugged into the "anti-woke" counterculture, sometimes given to "shitposting" and "lib-owning," sometimes even a little Trumpy—has been arguably a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy by Musk-bashing journos. This is not to say that Musk has no responsibility for his behavior. He's a grown man; he's also a man prone to thin-skinned and immature outbursts (as the infamous June 2018 "pedo guy" spat with the British cave rescuer in Thailand attests). But his quarrel with the progressive commentariat is a tango that has definitely taken two.

Today, when Musk appears poised to take over Twitter (talk about lib-owning!), there are excellent reasons to question the proposals he has aired for transforming how the social media platform works. I suspect he genuinely underestimates the difficulties of maintaining a "free speech" commitment—a commitment to allowing maximum self-expression and exchange of ideas—on a global site with some 330 million active users, while weeding out the toxic stuff that would make it unusable if allowed to spread unchecked. His recent suggestion that he would "hew close to the laws" of the countries in which it Twitter operates opens a whole new can of worms, given that many of those countries have extremely restrictive laws. And his willingness to engage a noxious alt-right troll like Michael Cernovich in the same tweet raises all sorts of questions about his judgment.

Similar questions are raised, in my view, by Musk's intemperate anti-lockdown posts at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But it is no less true that some of the recent attacks on Musk—not just from individual Twitter users but from established media—have been intemperate, ill-informed and blatantly unfair. Perhaps the most egregious example so far is the May 5 *New York Times* "deep dive" into Musk's South African background by John Eligon and Lynsey Chutel, which started by suggesting that Musk had largely kept quiet about "how growing up as a white person under the racist apartheid system in South Africa may have shaped him." The clear implication was that the Tesla chief was hiding sinister racist secrets. Yet further down, the article revealed that young Elon apparently had black friends (surely an unusual thing for his milieu), questioned his father about the country's racial injustices, and once got bullied at school for chiding a classmate who had used a racial slur. Internet sleuths such as Tom Gara (of Meta/Facebook, formerly of *Buzzfeed News*) quickly uncovered that the *Times* article had been stealth-edited from an initial, more negative version. What's more, Eligon's first tweet linking to the article bizarrely suggested that South African apartheid, with its extensive system of censorship, illustrated the dangers of the "unchecked speech" that Musk was championing. But the "unchecked speech" in question was the government's apartheid propaganda.

Ultimately, perhaps, it boils down to this: While right-wing complaints about left-wing bias in the social media often amount to self-serving grievance-mongering, the progressive freakout over Musk does suggest that many people on the cultural left think Twitter should be their turf and their instrument of social change.

This is especially evident in the alarm about all the harassment and disinformation that Musk's (yet unseen) free speech policies will supposedly unleash on Twitter.

For instance, in a *New York Times* guest essay, Elizabeth Spiers, the founding editor of *Gawker*, writes that "free speech absolutists" like Musk often conflate criticism with harassment. Spiers writes that she has received rape threats, threats to her family, misogynistic comments, and even anonymous letters to her home address. According to Spiers:

These are not uncommon experiences for women and minorities who speak in public, on Twitter and beyond, and I've suffered far less harassment than others. It happens all the time. Twitter's current moderation policies can't completely prevent it, but they are designed to mitigate it. Twitter requires its users to comply with a terms of service agreement that bans certain types of speech—harassment, in particular. It also has moderation policies in place to combat disinformation. …

Mr. Musk insists that the company's policies are too restrictive. … It's an absolutist definition of free speech that says corporations are obligated to let things that may be harmful to their users or bad for their businesses remain on their platforms because any limitation on speech is de facto censorship and censorship of any kind is worse than the consequences of hate speech, harassment and disinformation.

Of course, getting rid of policies that restrict hate speech will most likely affect women and minorities much more than it does white men like Mr. Musk, and unlike him, most people on the receiving end of threats and harassment can't afford personal security. Twitter's rules already allow for a broad range of abuse, much of which falls into a kind of gray area between personal insult and harassment.

But in fact, in a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, respondents reported that they had experienced online harassment at fairly similar rates—whether men or women, white or black. shows (similarly to previous studies) that men, woman, and black and white Americans experience online harassment at fairly similar rates. The specifics differ; women, not surprisingly, are more likely to report sexual harassment on the Internet, while men are more likely to report threats. But there's a bigger issue here, which is that Spiers's definition of Twitter harassment almost certainly leaves out a vast swath of extremely nasty abuse from the wrong (from her point of view) end of the political spectrum: progressive mobbings.

On the very day Twitter melted down over the presumed Musk purchase, a writer named Marisa Kabas tweeted asking people about their "favorite day on Twitter" in an apparent nostalgic tribute to the site. One of the top replies came from another writer, Jenna Quigley:

What Quigley was talking about (with support from several other "blue check" Twitter users) was one of the more horrific episodes of mass harassment in Twitter history: the December 2013 mobbing of Justine Sacco for a tweet, sent just before an 11-hour flight from London to Cape Town, that read, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" Sacco, the 30-year-old director of corporate communications at IAC media company, was mocking a clueless "white privilege" mentality; but when her tweet, sent to her handful of followers, went viral, people assumed she was being literal instead of satirical. Outrage mounted, spurred by the fact that IAC had issued a statement that Sacco was in flight and unavailable, and people gleefully anticipated the look on her face when she landed and checked her email and social media accounts. By the time she did land, she was not only unemployed but so infamous some hotels canceled her bookings and her own relatives shunned her. Yet, when an effort was finally made to set the record straight (partly thanks to Jon Ronson's coverage of Sacco's story in his 2015 book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*), a progressive academic, Patrick Blanchfield, saw fit to pen a *Washington Post* column griping that Sacco was an undeserving "poster child" for online abuse because 1) her ironic tweet could still have caused "hurt" and somehow compounded or trivialized the tragedy of AIDS in Africa; 2) she was an affluent white woman and was "actually doing just fine" (meaning that she had a job again after more than a year of being unemployed, in hiding and sometimes suicidal) and (3) people with progressive credentials, including affluent white feminists who often endured mean words online, were far more deserving.

If you don't think Sacco's mobbing was an awful episode of Twitter harassment, chances are, your definition of "harassment" is narrowly political. If you think it was a great moment on Twitter, then you're actually not against online harassment at all. And one can find plenty of other examples of online harassment masquerading as social justice activism. Consider, for instance, the years-long smear campaign targeting journalist Jesse Singal with vicious slanders and threats—many of them coming not from anonymous trolls but from blue-check progressive journalists. This hounding is pure political vendetta: Singal has questioned some aspects of progressive conventional wisdom on transgender issues.

Or consider people targeted as bigots, sometimes wrongly, on the basis of a viral video. In October 2018, for instance, a Portland, Oregon woman was blasted in the social media—and in a *Portland Mercury* article—under the derisive nickname "Crosswalk Cathy" for supposedly calling the cops on a black couple over a bad parking job. In fact, as the *Mercury* eventually admitted, the woman seen in a 30-second video clip was not calling the

police but a city parking hotline to report that a car was partly blocking a crosswalk while its owners were picking up takeout food nearby (and had no way of knowing the owners' racial identity until they returned and confronted her). After the video went viral, at least one activist explicitly invoked the power of Twitter as a punitive instrument: "Twitter, do your thing and identify this woman." Others tweeted out identifying information, urged people to contact the school where the woman worked in data management, and bragged about writing to demand her firing. While Crosswalk Cathy apparently did not lose her job, she scrubbed her entire online presence for at least a year. Should plans to fight online abuse include proposals for curbing such incidents?

"Disinformation"—as shown by the recent controversies about the proposed "Disinformation Governance Board" of the Department of Homeland Security, raises similar loaded definitional questions. Do we only put the "disinformation" sticker on Donald Trump's "stolen election" lie, or should it be affixed to, at the very least, a "misleading" or "partly false" label to the parallel claims of Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams? Should Twitter's disinformation crackdown have snagged the many viral tweets in March 2021 claiming, based on a blatantly out-of-context quote, that a Georgia police official at a press conference casually excused Robert Allan Long's fatal shootings of eight people (six of them women of Asian background) at several Atlanta spas and massage parlors as "yesterday was a really bad day for him, and this is what he did"? (In reality, the official, Capt. Jay Baker, was merely answering a question about what the suspect told interrogators.) Would it apply to a viral tweet earlier this month which distorted a footnote from Justice Samuel Alito's draft opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade* to claim that Alito and Justice Amy Coney Barrett were arguing that abortion should be banned because the United States needs a "domestic supply of infants" for adoption?

The same complications extend to "hate speech." Does the definition apply to invective against whites or males? Do "gender-critical feminists" have a point when they argue that Twitter's policy against "misgendering" (which can apply not only to targeted abuse of transgender individuals but to general statements of opinion about sex, gender, and identity) puts a heavy thumb on the scale of one side in an ongoing and still-unresolved controversy?

Given that Twitter is a mammoth site with somewhat opaque rules and policies and haphazard enforcement—based not only on user complaints but on decisions by individual staffers—drawing any kind of conclusions about patterns of bias is enormously difficult. Again, the point isn't "Twitter is biased against conservatives" or "Twitter is biased in favor of progressives." It's more that the people who think Musk will unleash the forces of darkness on Twitter really do tend to have a huge blind spot when it comes to the toxicity that is already there, including toxicity among progressives, and they want the social media to be managed in a "no enemies to the left" frame of mind.

Assuming Musk does acquire Twitter after all, it is far from certain that he will make things better. But despite his nods to the "countercultural" right, he really does not seem to have a right-wing agenda; he's no deep political thinker, but he's flexible enough to offer some possibilities beyond kneejerk polarization. (Is the proposed unbanning of Trump a sign of where things are going? Not necessarily—and some say the move won't benefit Trump.) Musk certainly seems willing to talk across political lines, even if his ego is likely to get in the way. Preemptively making him the enemy is not a smart move.

If nothing else, a Musk buyout or even just the prospect of one might shake the place up and drive us to reexamine all sorts of questions—including the political and ideological framing of such concepts as "harassment," "disinformation," and "hate speech" on Twitter. Perhaps the difficult conversations could also tackle the outsized role Twitter has come to play in the media and in politics. Is it a public square? A national consciousness? An imperfect cross-section of unrepresentative opinions? Or just a site where journalists, pundits, and activists like to hang out, and whose importance they are prone to inflating?

We're having that conversation now, which is not a bad start.

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