

# The Cacophony of a Caged Bird—Elon Musk & The Twitter Saga

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, Elon Musk entered a \$44 billion deal to buy social media platform Twitter. The latter, in keeping with its standards, exploded into a chaotic conversation as everyone on it with any stake in the matter rushed to get their opinion into the limelight. Musk had just been accused of sexual misconduct a mere week ago, and his critics were chomping at the bit to tear him apart. Finally, on 6<sup>th</sup> July, Musk terminated the deal with Twitter over concerns about the number of bot and spam accounts on the platform. While the deal had a clause to allow this considering surprising new information that went against Musk's interests, this is scarcely reason to call quits on the deal. Let's take a deeper dive into the ethically murky world of Twitter and its enigmatic almost-owner.

## Part I: The Tumultuous World of Twitter

### Revenue and Conflict of Interests

Twitter started out with no clear revenue stream in mind. the CEO, Jack Dorsey, had proposed Twitter as a [free SMS service with some elements of social networking](#). Facebook, the fastest-rising social networking site then, turned a profit in 2009, causing Twitter to react by creating "Promoted Tweets," which allowed these tweets to be shown higher up on a user's feed when the keyword, or hashtag, was searched. Twitter differed from other contemporary social networks by using

visible tags to create trends, an idea Instagram would later adopt. Marking a tweet with a hashtag allowed it to be linked to other similarly tagged tweets, which would then contribute to creating a larger trend. This trend would be shown to a larger group of people. Later in 2009, Twitter introduced “Promoted Accounts” and “Promoted Trends,” with both functioning similarly, allowing accounts to be suggested to more people, and the content they posted to be shown in more trends. Twitter would later add advertising to the mix, evolving the promoted content model. Now Twitter has [three types](#) of paid ways to boost content interactions artificially:

- **Promoted Ads**, which are advertising tweets shown to a wider audience. These tweets make the audience feel like the advertiser is engaging in natural conversation, thus giving it a more organic feel. Several otherwise faceless corporations use this to humanise themselves to the public. Wendy’s, KFC, and Burger King are good examples of this.
- **Follower Ads**, which recommend the advertiser’s account to more people. This, combined with the blue “Verified Badge,” allows promoted accounts to seem legitimate and trustworthy, allowing them to garner a larger following.
- **Trend Takeovers**. Trend Takeovers present a very interesting case. [Twitter describes](#) it as follows.

*Trend Takeover puts your ad alongside what’s trending [...] Don’t just be a part of what’s happening, be what’s happening with Trend Takeovers. [...] Each Trend Takeover includes three key components: the #Hashtag, Trend description, and Companion Tweets. Companion Tweets will appear in people’s timelines, help encourage interaction, and maximize scale and impact.*

Twitter has no restrictions on the type of companies that can advertise if they aren’t promoting directly harmful products. This allows any company, political or religious group, social

influencer, or people with vested interests to veritably *create* trending topics shown to millions of people. If done right, this can boost a potentially divisive agenda into the public domain, where the starting point of “Companion Tweets” can foster organic expansion as more people get involved.

The other revenue source Twitter has is user data licensing. This accounts for 11% of their revenue for FY 2021. [Further details can be seen here in Twitter’s Form 10-K filing with the US SEC.](#) As per Form 10-K, Twitter has a vested interest in maintaining and growing its user base’s attention, which it fights for with other social media and advertising agencies. This means Twitter profits off attention-grabbing, outrage-inducing content, and it actively encourages the promotion of such topics.

[Twitter has only been profitable twice in the last 11 financial years.](#) Both the profitable years coincided with the build-up to the 2020 US elections, when political tensions were fraught, though 2020 itself saw them incur the biggest loss in the time period. The most followed Twitter account is Barack Obama, not an entertainer or an athlete, like other social media. While Twitter does not release Trending data transparently, it is no secret that Twitter is the leading platform for political discourse. Twitter is most active when there is political unrest. All these factors combine to show that Twitter and its sponsors have a vested interest in keeping the public angry and divided, for the sponsors to maintain relevancy, and for Twitter to profit.

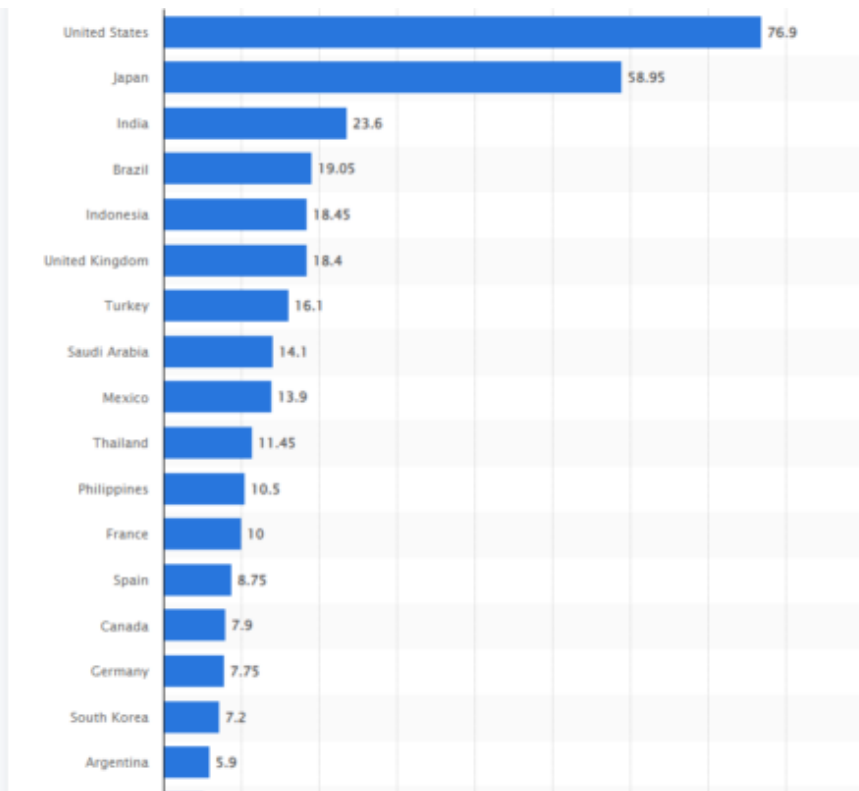
## **A Community Based on Algorithmic Intervention**

In its early days, Twitter served as a critical tool in disseminating information at rapid rates. In 2009, the Iranian presidential elections were a source of much controversy as winner Mahmoud Ahmedinejad’s law enforcement violently clashed

with the opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi's supporters. This resulted in deaths amongst the demonstrators. Ahmedinejad quickly imposed a media curfew on journalists and any outgoing information. In response, [protestors took to Twitter](#) to coordinate events and release news of the crackdown to the world.

As people grew to see the importance of a platform allowing massive reach and creating "communities," Twitter became a symbol for free speech and close-community interactions between larger-than-life figures and their followers. In 2016, right around the equally divisive US Presidential Election that had seen Twitter get a large increase in pointless playground squabbles over political sides, [Twitter changed the algorithm of its media feeds](#). Rather than having tweets displayed in chronological order, a proprietary algorithm that operates behind closed walls would decide what content the user would consume. This saw criticism from people, as they correctly predicted that it would lead to large bubbles of similarly opinionated people who would only ever interact with each other, thus further cementing their biases and behaviours. This is called "echo-chambering," and it is a huge problem with community-based social media such as Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter, which algorithmically define the content you are to be shown or openly encourage the use of closed communities. 4chan especially has been host to numerous controversies.

Twitter is largely used by [Americans, Japanese, and Indians](#) between the [ages](#) of 25-34, as per Statista. This demographic is susceptible to large-scale manipulation via social media feeds creating echo chambers.



*Twitter users by country, in millions. [Credit: Statista.com]*

As seen with the Cambridge Analytica scandal user data manipulation can lead to massive real-world consequences, and people are very easily swayed by the content they see repeatedly. Twitter's sense of community and closeness to public figures, the "Verified Badge's" sense of trustworthiness, the egregious desire to virtue-signal to establish self-worth and gain recognition, and the general reduction of attention-spans and memory lead to an easily malleable demographic with disposable income and political opinions that can be distributed to massive audiences via the Retweet feature.

[This research paper by Cheok, Edwards, and Muniru \(2017\)](#), discusses the biological and social impact of a world submerged in fast media, and the potential use for this new psyche. The cancel culture aspect of Twitter is far too complex for the scope of this article, though it is what Twitter is most infamous for. Cancel culture witch hunts can be severely detrimental for the subject, and while in some

cases it has proven to be a useful tool in upending malicious status quos, it fails to have much of a continued impact on topics that matter and often has far-overblown consequences based on biased or false narratives. Twitter is also criticized for the unfair de-platforming of public figures.

The most infamous was the removal of Donald Trump and accusations of the community guidelines teams removing accounts that went against their narrative, even though [recent research claims](#) that Twitter favours this side in tweets promoted. The amplification of liberal and conservative voices on US Twitter is still under debate. The “Twitter Experience” can often be unpleasant, with hate-filled echo chambers, witch-hunts, corporate posturing, and a [deep political divide](#) in everything. Twitter has the potential to be much more positively impactful but has devolved into petty squabbling with no direction, leading to Twitter profiting more. In all its ethos, Twitter, Inc. is motivated by its bottom line rather than a desire for social change.

## Part 2: The Enigmatic Elon Musk

Musk is no less of a divisive figure. Product of a controversial but rich family, Musk became best known for taking PayPal to a large market, though the product was not his own. Over the course of the coming decades, Musk would build an empire that would be at the cutting edge of technology. Over his 20-year span in the industry, Musk has made his mark as a serial entrepreneur with a taste for success. His companies Tesla and SpaceX have been leading innovators in their fields.

Musk’s OpenAI project, best known now for its DALL-E-2 AI art and Neuralink for its neurotechnological creations actively push the boundary of tech innovation. Musk’s success, though,

is just as enigmatic as his public persona. While credited as a co-founder of Tesla, he only acquired that role as the outcome of a legal battle. SpaceX was given a 2006 contract by then NASA Administrator Mike Griffin despite not having a single successful launch. Fortune and connections have certainly favoured the “TechnoKing of Tesla,” which is now [his legal position in the company](#). Whether Musk’s eccentricities hide genius or a scheming fraud has been in much debate on most social forums, especially Twitter.



*Musk’s Twitter feed on an average. [Credit: [Twitter.com/ElonMusk](https://twitter.com/ElonMusk)]*

Musk’s connection with Twitter is deep. Musk became a household name sharing memes on Twitter and engaging with his “fans.” Musk also is a master at marketing via social media. His failed 2019 CyberTruck reveal was lampooned widely as an attack on his capabilities Yet, 2020 was the first time Tesla turned [a full-year profit](#). Twitter played a big hand in this as well. Much of Musk’s public success came from him portraying himself as one of the masses rather than a

snobbish, detached billionaire.

Musk appeared on Joe Rogan's podcast [smoking marijuana](#), and [hosted YouTube celebrity PewDiePie's weekly meme review](#) in 2019. Musk sold 10% of his Tesla stock in 2021 (\$16.4b), based on a tweet asking the public if he should do that to appeal to growing anti-capitalistic sentiments, while also exercising his expiring option to sell the stock. This was clearly an attempt to kinder some backing for himself in an increasingly fraught social system, while also benefitting from the very system these people were protesting. Analyzing Musk's behaviour in the public domain makes the saga of the Twitter buyout much more complex from a political and social standpoint.

## The Twitter Takeover

As seen before, Twitter is only sporadically profitable, but from a societal perspective, it holds much value. Twitter's free speech agenda had come under fire recently, and Musk, calling himself a "free-speech absolutist," wanted to enforce his ideals. Major publications have criticized Elon for being [callous](#) and [egotistical](#) in his operations, [claiming that he doesn't have a business plan for the Twitter deal](#). Musk's takeover bid came hot on the heels of a sexual misconduct allegation by a former employee who was supposedly paid off. While Musk claims that he hadn't done anything like that, and this was an attempt to slander him, the bid was the perfect storm to follow.

Leftist personalities on Twitter took his takeover as a sign of the end of their "free speech," while conservative reactions were generally more favourable after Musk hinted at having Trump re-instated. While the politics of the situation caused the focus to shift away from Musk's problematic personality and actions, Musk's [proposed rule changes](#) for Twitter made him a catalytic facet of the age-old conversation



on the limits and usefulness of free speech, especially in light of his [refusal to censor Russian telecommunications](#) on his Starlink satellite donated to Ukraine. Bot/spam accounts are a huge issue on any social media. These accounts can be very harmful in amplifying the spread of false narratives and biases, as much as clogging or diluting real, impactful ones.

Musk's proposed changes of authenticating all users, loosening content moderation, which was previously criticized for being massively left-leaning, and making the algorithm open-source are all generally accepted to be good changes and in the spirit of democratic internet. According to the 10-K filing, Twitter does indeed consider bot accounts to be a financial threat, and their not choosing to disclose this information to Musk is vindictive. Musk made [this tweet](#), claiming Twitter's lawsuit filed on July 12<sup>th</sup> would benefit him, does a bad job at explaining his motivations, which would remain a mystery until the court hearing sheds some light on the matter.



*Twitter's share price since the takeover announcement [Credit: Google.com]*

Overall, the impact Musk could've had on Twitter, and the platform's importance in contemporary socio-politics was certainly significant. Whether it would have been a net positive has been discussed at length by the denizens of the platform itself, raising the very important question—How much power should one person wield?

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