

TWO AMERICAN TOXIC TWINS: TRUMP AND MUSK

By Michelle Goldberg



What Trump did to the GOP, Musk has done to Twitter, says the writer. There are many damning anecdotes in Kate Conger and Ryan Mac's new book, *Character Limit: How Elon Musk Destroyed Twitter*, but one from February of last year perfectly captures the astonishing pettiness of the world's richest man.

Attending the Super Bowl as a guest of Rupert Murdoch, Musk had one of the most luxurious seats in the house, but rather than watching the game, he was glued to his phone in dismay. Both he and President Joe Biden had sent tweets cheering on the Philadelphia Eagles, but even though Biden had far fewer followers than Musk on the platform, the president's tweet garnered 29 million views to Musk's 8.4 million.

Livid, Musk demanded that his engineers find out why his tweet was underperforming Biden's. He left the game early to fly back to his San Francisco office, where dozens of employees were summoned to meet him on a Sunday night. Eventually, to placate their boss, the engineers tweaked Twitter's algorithm to boost Musk's posts, pushing them into users' feeds whether they follow him or not.

"In effect, Musk's tweets would have higher priority over any other post," write Conger and Mac, technology reporters for *The New York Times*. As they put it toward the end of the book, "A man allergic to criticism had bought himself the largest audience in the world, and hoped for praise." No wonder he and Donald Trump get along. What Trump has done to the Republican Party (GOP), Musk has done to Twitter, which he's renamed X.

It was always bad, but now it's much worse. Because Musk has ruined its system for verifying users and gutted its content moderation, it's teeming with fake news; recently for example, it was full of false claims, amplified by Musk himself, that a car with an explosive device inside was found near Donald Trump's rally on Long Island in New York. White nationalists have been welcomed back onto the platform, and many journalists have fled.

When I logged on just now, two of the first three posts in my feed were trollish squibs about voting fraud from Musk, whom I don't follow. The silver lining to Trump's takeover of the Republican Party is that he's made it more marginal; Mark Robinson, the Republican nominee for governor in North Carolina, is only the most recent *Maga* (Make America Great Again) candidate to implode.



Kate Conger

Ryan Mac



Similarly, Musk has transformed Twitter into a dull, fetid cesspool of white nationalism and paranoid lies. But by making it an extension of his own disordered id, he's taken a platform that has always been toxic and decreased its relevance, especially to those outside the right. In March, Edison Research reported that the number of Americans who say they use Twitter has dropped from 27% to 19%, a 30% decline.

Another study, from market research group Sensor Tower, found in February that daily

mobile use of the platform was down 23% since Musk took over. He bought Twitter for US\$44 billion and has reduced its value to less than half of that. What's more important – though harder to quantify – is that the site has lost the power to drive news cycles.

One case in point: The Washington Post recently reported that Russian propagandists were behind an apparently viral video on X falsely accusing Kamala Harris of involvement in a hit-and-run accident. But the smear never developed legs. A popular



Donald Trump

poster on BlueSky, one of several smaller Twitter alternatives, noted that even “very online” people had missed the original fabrication, adding, “Not being constantly on Twitter just keeps paying off.”

Obviously, we can't simply ignore what the worst people on the internet are doing. But it's better for our civic health if they can't monopolise our attention. There's another advantage to Twitter/X's decline. The site's architecture has always rewarded anger, bad faith and cruel pile-ons, making it a powerful tool for enforcing ideological conformity. For years, Twitter encouraged among Democrats a distorted idea of what the political consensus in their party looked like, creating the deceptive sense that radical ideas like police abolition were in fact conventional wisdom.

One of Biden's strengths in the 2020 primary was that he was the least online of candidates, whereas Harris hurt herself by being overly solicitous of social media activists. Now those activists are scattered among several different platforms, none of which have replicated Twitter's power to steer the national discourse. I can't even remember the last time there was an influential left-wing hashtag campaign. And in this environment, Harris has faced relatively little blowback for playing to the moderate swing-state voters who tend to decide elections.



Elon Musk

The right, by contrast, is more firmly ensconced in its own online echo chamber than ever. It is in part thanks to Musk that JD Vance, who is very much a product of the right-wing internet, is on the Republican ticket, where he is devoting valuable campaign time to his posting habit. But the narrow ideological fixations that endear Vance to Silicon Valley reactionaries render him off-putting to many ordinary people; he is one of the most unpopular vice-presidential nominees in recent history.

Like the Republican Party, Musk's platform can still cause enormous damage in its degraded Maga state. It's being used to demonise and terrorise the Haitian residents of Springfield, Ohio; Musk has personally promoted some ugly posts. If Trump loses, I fear the role X is going to play in amplifying his lies about a stolen election. Still, the site seems like a poisoned chalice. Musk spent a fortune on the largest megaphone he could find, only to discover that the more he shouts into it, the fewer people are listening. ■

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