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The Twitter Takeover by Elon Musk

Elon Musk, the world's richest man and the biggest name in business today has taken over Twitter and brought his antics with him. After a back and forth deal that saw the company sue Musk to force him to complete the transaction, on October 28, 2022 he dubbed himself "Chief Twit" as the "virtual town hall" of social media platforms became his. Even before Musk took over the company there had been fears of how his brash and over-the-top attitude towards freedom of speech, the treatment of his employees, and the toxic work culture he is typically known for will bring Twitter to its end. Throughout the first few weeks since he bought the company there have been scandals that have had both the traditional media and social media's fascination running wild, and story after story coming out daily about employees leaving in droves, hateful and dangerous content being spread, and failures in rolling out new products. With Musk coming to Twitter there will be far reaching implications on the future of the company. How Twitter will address the spread of hate speech and misinformation disguised as free speech will decide whether Musk's vision of virtual town hall will be a safe place or a scary place.

Musk's personality has brought himself critics and everyone is going to be watching very closely how his new direction of the company might change its dedication to social responsibility issues. As a publicly traded corporation, Twitter was set up as a company that takes their responsibility to the public seriously, developing a brand message about how they are "using the

positive power of Twitter to strengthen our communities” (Twitter for Good). A platform that is largely used by celebrities, politicians, journalists, and businesses to communicate to their consumers/constituents, Twitter has the power to influence the social narrative. With Musk at the helm of Twitter, there are legitimate concerns whether the company will still resemble one that states on their Twitter for Good page under Internet Safety and Education “We help people understand healthy digital habits and online safety....We support initiatives that defend and respect all voices by promoting free expression and defending civil liberties” (Twitter for Good). In just the first few weeks after taking over the company, a large percentage of employees have left the company either resigning or being laid off, which can lead one to wonder if there’s anyone left at the company that wrote or shares those ideals.

The uproar against Musk is loud in minority communities concerned whether his approach to freedom of speech will provide a dangerous environment where hate speech and misinformation flourish and help radicalize already dangerous people. With an already polarized nation in the United States, freedom of speech has been at the focal point of attention as social media gives people a voice to spread hate speech and violent rhetoric. Before the takeover took place, Sumayyah Waheed, senior policy counsel for Muslim Advocates, stated her concerns saying “Musk’s takeover threatens to make Twitter an even more dangerous place for Muslims and other marginalized people—and that includes the very real possibility of allowing [former president Donald] Trump back on the platform” (Jenkins). And as of November 19, her concerns became a reality when Musk reinstated Trump’s Twitter account after holding a vote on the Twitter platform and 51.8% voted yes to reinstate, according to ABC News (Trump’s Twitter). This is just one of many consequential decisions that Musk has been making since his takeover, and they keep coming every day with no consideration of the consequences.

Musk has been very clear that he intends to make Twitter a free speech haven, something where everyone can have their say and feel safe at the same time. The question is can free speech really be free and still allow a safe environment? Musk seems to think that it can, telling ABC News “the reason I acquired Twitter is because it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital town square, where a wide range of beliefs can be debated in a healthy manner, without resorting to violence” (O’Brien, Krisher). The problem with social media and freedom of speech is that people tend to believe everything they see when it’s online, and also dangerous rhetoric can be spread along so easily. Musk went on to say “there is currently great danger that social media will splinter into far right wing and far left wing echo chambers that generate more hate and divide our society” (O’Brien, Krisher). It will be important for Musk to be able to find a proper balance between freedom of speech protections and a safe environment for Twitter to be successful and continue to be a place where people can be comfortable.

The task of moderating content and ensuring a safe environment for users has been made more difficult as many employees have been laid off or resigned since Musk’s takeover. On November 17, 2022 Musk had a deadline for workers to pledge to “extremely hardcore” work, which left hundreds of engineers and other workers to resign with severance pay (Bajak). Robert Graham, a veteran cybersecurity entrepreneur, told ABC News “It does look like he’s going to blow up Twitter” (Bajak). With so many employees having left the company it remains to be seen if there will be enough people left to keep the ship running. Over the next few days Musk kept digging Twitter deeper into problems. After tweeting that “the best people are staying”, the next day he sent out an all-hands email summoning “anyone who actually writes software” to his office, according to an employee who had quit but was still receiving company emails (Bajak). Musk will need to be able to find a proper balance of workers that can properly run the company,

keep the software operating so that users can access the site and have moderation of the content that is tweeted so that users can feel safe while enjoying their platform.

The issue with Twitter's employees has caused some of them to work long hours under stressful conditions. Sinead McSweeney, Twitter's global vice-president for public policy, started working over 75 hours a week since Musk's takeover because of the large number of employees that had been fired, the Irish Times reported (Mann). McSweeney had to fight in court just to keep her job after she filed for an "injunction to block Twitter from firing her", according to Business Insider (Mann). McSweeney's assessment of Musk was that he was giving the staff "mixed messages" and was "[leading the organization] in an unorthodox manner" while firing and rehiring people "with no apparent logic" (Mann). Even with all of that said, McSweeney seemed inclined to stick to her job saying that she didn't take issue with "putting my shoulder to the wheel" (Mann). There should not be so much turmoil in the work environment that employees have to fight in court to keep their job and Musk will not be able to count on everyone being as dedicated as McSweeney.

Within all of the issues of Twitter as a workplace, Musk has found himself alienating the people he needs to keep the company running efficiently, causing some to believe that he is not truly interested in the company's future and just hoping to dig himself out of a deal he ultimately did not want. According to ABC News, a message posted on Twitter's internal Slack from a lawyer on Twitter's privacy team read "Over the last two weeks, Elon has shown that he cares only about recouping the losses he's incurring as a result of failing to get out of his binding obligation to buy Twitter" (Privacy). Musk's interest in Twitter became apparent to the public on March 14 when it was revealed that he owned the largest stake in the company at 9.1% (Zahn). It was then on April 14 Musk made an offer to buy Twitter for about 43 billion dollars, and after

some back and forth from Twitter and Musk it was announced that Twitter had accepted Musk's offer to buy the company for 44 billion dollars (Zahn). After that, Musk rescinded his offer citing fake accounts on the platform that were not disclosed, Twitter then sued Musk to force the acquisition and after a battle in court seemed to be against his odds, Musk finally completed the transaction on October 28, according to a timeline of the events provided by ABC News (Zahn). Musk had been reluctant to complete his purchase of Twitter after he suspected that the company was hiding information about how many spam users and fake accounts were on the platform, which makes it harder to gauge the amount of monetizable users on the platform. Without knowing the real numbers of actual users it makes it more difficult to tell advertisers how many people will be seeing their ads, and that made Musk uneasy as to how profitable Twitter could be under those circumstances.

Advertisers have their own concerns with Twitter, as many of Twitter's top advertising partners have either suspended or cut off relationships with the company. Laurie Schalow, Chipotle's chief corporate affairs officer, said "We have pulled back on our paid and owned content on Twitter while we gain a better understanding on the direction of the platform under its new leadership" (Vranica, Haggin). This shows that Musk's leadership in itself could possibly be a bigger problem for advertisers than anything else. Losing out on top advertising partners could spell doom for a company that receives 89 percent of its revenue from advertisers, according to The Wall Street Journal (Vranica, Haggin). Musk himself has said that the company "[had suffered a] massive drop in revenue" and it was possible for the company to go bankrupt (Vranica, Haggin). The problems keep adding up with Musk in charge and if things keep going badly for the company, there might not even be a Twitter left for people to use.

As with all major changes, Twitter has gone through some tumultuous times under the leadership of Musk, but there may be some hope for the future of Twitter. Musk has a proven track record of success running Tesla and SpaceX and there should be some reason to be optimistic about what he can bring. According to The Wall Street Journal, some Madison Avenue executives are saying he might be able to keep the company afloat. Mark Penn, a chief executive of ad firm Stagwell Group LLC says “It will take a few months to resolve it but he will eventually have an attractive proposition, given his track record” (Vranica, Haggin). Even with his proven successes, running a social media company is very different from his other companies. With all of the challenges Twitter has faced in just over a month since Musk’s takeover, it will be an uphill battle for the company to survive.

Though the future for Twitter is uncertain at this point, the company's fate will rest in the hands of its new owner. Musk’s attempt to rework the company as he sees fit has already seen the company layoff hundreds of workers that keep the site running and moderate content. Users of Twitter will now be at an even bigger risk to viewing content with misinformation and hate speech. The safety issues for users has led Twitter’s advertisers to reconsider their relationship with the company, which could cut off their primary source of revenue and lead the company to collapse. With all of these issues facing Musk’s Twitter, the world will be watching to see what the company will do next. The next steps will determine whether the platform will be an inviting place to converse freely and respectfully, or a free-for-all where the danger lies in the information.

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