Musk's Twitter Acquisition
Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire

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Twitter, the social-networking platform, which serves as a sociopolitical barometer, was recently purchased by Elon Musk, the owner of Tesla. Musk has fired 50% of Twitter's staff and toyed with its policies on registration and posts, making it an oligarch's puppet. Clearly, the world needs a "global digital public town hall" governed in the public interest.

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I'm wondering when people will realize the value of Twitter was the people that worked here—Twitter ex-employee.
—Newton and Schiffer (2022)

Platforms, which are "infrastructures of value creation, capture and distribution, that facilitate interactions among various actors (including consumers, producers, advertisers, service providers, and suppliers)" are an important pillar of our digital economy. They "harvest data from such interactions, and generate data-based intelligence for optimising value" (Gurumurthy et al 2021). Platforms are emerging as critical socio-economic infrastructures in different sectors, and range from purely commercial services (e-commerce platforms like Amazon or Flipkart or transport like Ola/Uber) to more "public service" functions such as social networking (Twitter or Instagram) or information search (Google).

Though in terms of number of users, Twitter is smaller than Facebook or WhatsApp, it has a much higher influence on shaping public discourse, as posts here ("tweets") are, by default, visible to all, and can be easily shared across the platform. According to an analysis, most heads of state as well as leading politicians have Twitter accounts with more than 50 million followers (Heilprin 2012). Not only political leaders, but all kinds of celebrities use Twitter to reach out to followers and others, and enhance their reach and popularity.

Elon Musk, the owner of the electric car company Tesla, and a "twitterati," has been critical of its management. He offered to purchase it to make it "free," meaning with far fewer restrictions on the content shared on the platform. The Board of Directors at Twitter accepted his offer to buy Twitter at $54.20 a share (total price around $44 billion). Musk perhaps made the offer in semi-jest, and tried hard to wriggle out of it, as he realised his offer was much higher than the market price. Unlike Facebook, Google or Amazon, Twitter has struggled to be profitable. Since inception, it has reported marginal profits in only two of the nine years it has been publicly listed (Hoffman 2022). At the end of 2021, Twitter claimed 217 million so-called "monetisable" users (who are exposed to advertising on the platform), far below Facebook which has 1.93 billion subscribers. This was one reason why Jack Dorsey, a founder and a former chief executive officer of Twitter, was earlier subject to an ouster bid (Jones 2021). Eventually, Musk completed the purchase, only when his offer was likely to be enforced by a court. This article explores the political and economic implications of the deal, and what would be required to ensure that a digital global public town hall functions in the public interest.

Political Implications

As a global town hall, Twitter is a space for discussion as well as expression. Its private sector location presumably has provided it the advantage of rapid and responsive platform development (technology), and funding. The company, at the same time, negotiates public roles by deciding on what should be allowed on the platform through content and user promotions and bans. In addition, it also earns revenues from advertising, which it optimises, by profiling users' interactions on the platform, and using algorithms to promote tweets and advertisements.

Twitter has also taken explicit political positions. For instance, it postponed a scheduled maintenance shutdown during the 2009 Iran election (Reuters 2009), to enable dissidents to continue using it during protests. It banned Trump on the grounds that he was inciting violence post the 2020 elections (Fung 2021). Thus, Twitter was already taking on a "public role." In May 2022, Twitter was fined $150 million by the United States (US) Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for collecting users' phone numbers and email addresses ostensibly only for security reasons, and then using it for targeted advertising (Milmo and Agency 2022).

With Musk's taking over of Twitter, such actions will get dictated even more, by possibilities of revenue generation.

While earlier, certain users could get a blue tick to signify that the account is "verified" (indicating that the person is really who they claim to be, based on their satisfying conditions that ensured authenticity), Musk made it available for a price of $8. Though he was explicitly warned by his own team that this would result in some people paying this small amount to impersonate others, Musk overruled objections. The result was a mayhem. A fake Elly Lily (which sells insulin) account tweeted that insulin would be free. A US Senator was impersonated. As this scheme snowballed into a widespread impersonation scam, Musk was forced to suspend it. The FTC has warned that it was watching Twitter with "deep concern" (Paul and Paresh 2022) and that no person or company was above the law.

To cut operating costs, Musk sacked 50% of the staff and 80% of the consultants of Twitter. His ultimatum to the staff to quit, unless they are prepared to be "hardcore engineers," working 80-hour a week (Syme 2021), has encouraged many to leave, putting tongue-in-cheek "softcore engineers" in their Twitter profiles (Dang et al 2022). Musk also dismissed employees who disagreed with his critical comments on the performance and architecture of the platform. Several senior management members, heading advertising, information security, trust and safety, and privacy have resigned (Fung 2022a). The verification fee and mass sacking betray the high pressure on Musk to make Twitter profitable (Brandom 2022).

It was already feared that Musk's taking over would weaken content moderation and allow much more hate speech, given his past statements. The exodus hence threatens to compound problematic speech on the platform, due to a sharp decline in people available for content moderation. Not surprisingly, the use of the racist N-word on Twitter increased threefold in the first full week of Elon Musk's ownership, and the use of homophobic, transphobic, and antisemitic slurs increased significantly (Bickerton 2022). As a result, IPG Mediabrands, a giant media buyer, has recommended that clients pause their spending on advertising on Twitter (Kolodny 2022).

It is also likely that Musk will establish partnerships with governments and other companies that benefit his own businesses, mortgaging users' participation and data privacy. Musk has partnered with the US government on SpaceX projects, signing a $653 million contract with the US Air Force in 2020, and providing starlink terminals to Ukraine to enable internet access during the war with Russia (Reuters 2020). His collaborations with governments are only likely to expand, leveraging his control over the personal information of millions of Twitter users. In a note posted to Twitter's Slack, a privacy team member wrote,

> Elon has shown that his only priority with Twitter users is how to monetize them. I do not believe he cares about the human rights activists, dissidents, our users in un-monetizable regions, and all the other users. (Newton and Schiffer 2022)

Musk's stated claim for his purchase: "It's just that my strong, intuitive sense is that having a public platform that is maximally trusted and broadly inclusive is extremely important to the future of civilization" (Hoffman 2022), thus rings hollow.

Unethical data practices are not new in the platform world; Alphabet, the company that owns Google, has used the data it collects from one platform to increase its reach on others (for instance, Alphabet pushes its products and advertised products on the Google search engine), Amazon identifies products that are popular on its platform and uses it to create cheaper competing products. However, as mentioned earlier, since Twitter is used as a political space, activists, and dissidents will face far greater vulnerability. Musk will be even less inclined to resist government overreach over user content. His defence of his withdrawing from Twitter's purchase included an argument that Twitter was made vulnerable by going to court against the Indian government. Tesla owns a factory in China, which is the second-biggest market for Tesla cars (Daxue Consulting 2022), making Twitter vulnerable to government pressures to share data on users from China. Though China has banned Twitter, around 10 million Twitter users are estimated to be from China.

In this connection, Musk's announcement that he wants Twitter to "authenticate all real humans," can make abuse victims' and political dissidents' positions vulnerable. Facebook (2015) earlier reversed a similar authentic identity policy, and allowed users to have pseudonyms. Experts have advised that techno-political policy issues such as authentic identity or bots are complex, and simplistic solutions would not work (Fung 2022b).

Maverick Oligarch

The replacement of deliberative decision-making based on corporate policy by imperial whims is starkly visible in Musk's actions. Musk cancelled remote work for all employees, then rolled it back partly (Bell 2022). The "you are fired" (The Simple Walk 2022) sentence on Twitter's Chief Legal Officer Vijaya Gadde, is reminiscent of the "off with your head" pronouncements of yesteryear monarchs. Sacked employees of another business he owns—SpaceX—have filed federal complaints, alleging they were illegally fired by the company in response to the work-related concerns they expressed, which included alleged sexual misconduct of Musk with an employee (Sheetz 2022).

Twitter in November 2022 revoked the ban on Donald Trump, post a poll initiated by Musk, in which around 51% of voters supported revocation. Twitter restored all functionality to a previously restricted user account of Mark Finchem, a prominent 2020 election denier who has been criticised for sharing anti-Semitic tropes and memes on Twitter, after Finchem made a personal request to Musk (Macdonald-Evoy 2022). Musk banned celebrity Kathy Griffin (O'Sullivan 2022), when she tweeted, impersonating him.

Thus, account bans and their revocations have become a bounty, to be handed out, without due process, based on the owner's fancy, with little regard for Musk's own pronouncement that such decisions would be only taken by a future content moderation council. Musk is simply creating a mirage of promoting public welfare and providing "power to the people" or "freeing the bird" while exercising power arbitrarily. Though the tech sector is notorious for worshipping larger-than-life heroes from Steve Jobs

to Bill Gates to Jeff Bezos to Mark Zuckerberg, Musk perhaps takes the cake. He is a megalomaniac with no compunctions in abusing power.

In an email calling for his first "all-hands" meeting, the billionaire warned his employees that "without significant subscription revenue, there is a good chance Twitter will not survive the upcoming economic downturn." Though prior to the takeover, Twitter was in no imminent danger of having to close; it is Musk's own action—paying an excessive amount for its unnecessary purchase—that has piled on a huge debt on Twitter, and created the pressure to increase profitability to service it.

While there is a general impression that Musk's leadership has led to Tesla doing better than other companies, it is also true that Tesla has benefited from generous public subsidies (Koopman 2013), and there have been numerous problems with Tesla's products. Engineering problems have plagued Tesla's cars for years (Isidore 2021). In China, last year, the government compelled Tesla to recall all cars to upgrade the software (Reuters 2021).

Platform Economy and Public Interest

The ability of individuals to purchase/own large companies (whose services have a global reach and impact) with their personal wealth and leveraging venture capital funding, points to another dimension of the problem. With little or no taxation of tech corporations, who are able to "locate" their bases in tax havens, and absence of wealth and inheritance taxes on the super rich, tech leaders have become obscenely wealthy; six of the top 10 richest persons in the world have made their fortune from the tech sector (Moskowitz 2022). Untaxed wealth also moves into venture capital funding in search of high returns. Unlike conventional business finance which seeks normal returns on investment based on regular economic activities of production, distribution and consumption, venture capital seeks super-normal profits, based on the funded entity eventually establishing itself as a monopoly/oligopoly. However, the creation of such oligopolies is often

not successful, rendering venture capital into high risk financing. Venture capital funding marks a new phase in capitalism where large amounts of funding are invested in risky business ventures, considering possibilities of super-normal profits, rather than any social welfare or public good considerations.

Untaxed tech profits and untaxed wealth of millionaires have also led to the highest rates of income and wealth inequalities in the world, causing reduced investments on necessary public services including on education and health. Such inequalities undermine democracy, as the rich and powerful hire lobbyists, influence politicians and policy, as well as shape public discourse by owning media outlets or funding think tanks. It is estimated that introducing a 2% wealth tax and a 33% inheritance tax on just the top 1% of the population can fund five fundamental economic rights of Indian citizens—the right to food, employment, free public healthcare, free public education and old-age pension and disability benefits (Mander et al 2020).

Another impact of platformisation of the economy is the creation of the "precariat:" workers who have neither job security nor decent and regular wages. The vulnerability of Ola drivers or Swiggy workers to the decisions of the platform, both in allotting work and in deciding

compensation is disguised by terming them as "partners," though these partners have little say in these vital decisions. Musk's wholesale sacking (coinciding with Meta and Amazon sacking more than 10,000 employees each) extends the ranks of precariat into these new professions and reveals toxicity inherent in the workplace. Zuckerberg's statement "I want to take accountability for these decisions" and "I've decided to … let more than 11,000 of our talented employees go," is quite Orwellian; he took "full accountability" and lost nothing, while 11,000 employees lost their livelihoods because he "let them go" (NDTV News Desk 2022).

Musk's purchase of Twitter highlights the injustice inherent in the current configuration of the platform economy. The solution is to have digital public spaces operating within just rules and processes for fair participation. There is a need for public platforms to be developed, with the support and investment of the public sector, not vulnerable to either commercial capture or state surveillance. This is not a pipe dream; the technological effort to create a viable platform like Twitter is estimated at up to a quarter million dollar (Myers Boyd 2013), with just 10 hours of coding required to create the basic platform. More importantly, there are existing FOSS alternatives; Mastodon

is a free and open source platform that provides similar functionality whose decentralised, non-commercial set-up could work better for facilitating meaningful conversations, as opposed to "people shouting at one another" mode of Twitter (Angwin 2022).

Public platforms—platforms established by not-for-profit entities or associations—can fulfil the needs, in a substantial though not in an identical manner as popular private platforms. As they fulfil public functions, they also should get public funding/subsidies from governments, at least until they mature. There is certainly a need for awareness-building among people, to recognise that trading away privacy and safety for a "free of cost" (gratis) service will be costly.

There are FOSS alternatives already being used, in different stages of maturity in different domain areas. While the GNU/Linux mature operating system powers most servers that make the internet, the FOSS operating system for phones and tablets is still maturing. Again, so long as platforms use open standards, it may not even be necessary for everyone to use the same platform to be able to interact with one another. It is the use of proprietary standards that prevents cross-platform use and locks-in users into one platform and facilitates the creation of mono/oligopolies.

There is work already happening to create worker cooperative models of platforms (such as the public transport apps like Namma Yatri [Kaushik 2022], that seek to compete with Uber/Ola) or the food cooperative platform of Kerala government (*Hindu* 2020). There is a strong need for digital public goods in many areas; for instance, providing an email address to each citizen, which is somewhat akin to digital birth registration. Digital public goods have a much lower marginal cost than physical public goods. Providing an email address, as a digital public good, costs nothing and can avoid Google accessing all our correspondence because (free of cost) gmail is a default for most people wanting to use email.

In India, the conceptualisation of the National Open Digital Ecosystem (NODE) is an attempt to have FOSS communities collaborate with the public sector in different areas (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology 2020). It is essential that such public or community digital technologies be open to public scrutiny and participation, essential for building trust, and civil society and community participation privileged. Public funding, open algorithms, transparent policies for code and data, ethical AI governance, social audit on programmes and platforms must be a necessary evolution of the NODE approach (IT for Change 2020).

There is also a need to insulate the digital public from the influence and control of the executive, and newer forms of governance and institutional frameworks are required, where norms assure justice and fairness, as well as support values of equity and democracy. Greater decentralisation of platforms will reverse a key problem of private platforms—the centralisation of control. To ensure checks and balances, the separation of different layers of the public digital infrastructure, into the basic platform/infrastructure layer, data layer, and AI services layer will be necessary. While these requirements certainly add to the complexity and need time to evolve, this will be essential for longer-term sustainability of the platform. "Moving fast and breaking things" (Satell 2019), Zuckerberg's mantra, is not viable. Such restructuring will also inhibit the creation of monopolies/oligopolies and tech barons (Srinivasan and Bloom 2020).

Today's elite compact is that digital technology is best provided by businesses, and we can only regulate them at great peril to the economy. That digital technologies are best used to centralise processes to enhance efficiencies, and these efficiencies will provide benefits for all, whereas decentralised community-based processes are inefficient and ineffective. This compact has to be challenged, to explore technology designs that support decentralised and participatory socioeconomic models with public ownership and control. This approach will, for instance, prioritise making platforms available in all languages spoken by the people, rather than sophistication in the access for an elite minority. As social overhead capital, platforms need public ownership and control, to design economic development to serve public welfare, something that the current capitalist model has failed to do.

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