How Elon Musk Vandalized the "Digital Town Square"

By Jim Lanier

On October 27, 2022, Elon Musk acquired the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, for $44 billion. Before the acquisition, Twitter was primarily known as a microblogging and social networking site where users could follow and message each other and post short-form ideas. Yet, Musk believed the app had potential for more. In one post that same month, he wrote that he would transform Twitter into the "everything app."

One way Elon Musk planned to do that was through "prioritizing free speech." Calling himself a free speech absolutist, Musk vowed to transform the app into a space where free speech would flourish. He said that would be achieved by "making the algorithms open source" and "authenticating all humans." Furthermore, Musk said he wanted to bring transparency and trust to Twitter. He predicted future financial, technological, and market-reach gains. He claimed he would raise Twitter's annual revenue to $26.4 billion by 2025 and that X would cut reliance on ad revenue to less than 50 percent of revenue. Finally, Musk predicted that Twitter would have 11,072 employees by 2025. He planned to revolutionize the app and the company behind it.

All that, however, is in the past. X *is* still a popular social networking and media platform – according to DemandSage, X currently has 557 million monthly users, making it the 15th most popular social media platform in the world – but does all that mean Musk's acquisition of X was good? The facts show the answer is *no.*

Flash forward a few years. Musk's buyout of Twitter, according to reporter Steve Gelsi from MarketWatch, is known as the "worst buyout since the global financial crisis." And X's problems are not just financial. There are other controversies and unfulfilled promises.

How did X get here? How did it go from the "everything app" to being declared "essential to the life cycle of incendiary falsehoods and conspiracy theories?"

The deterioration of X was a slow but continual process of recurring controversy. Many of the problems, which started the minute Musk acquired the company, resulted from what I call the *internal collapse*.

The internal collapse began almost from the moment Musk acquired Twitter. Musk said Twitter would have 11,072 employees by 2025, but within two weeks of acquiring Twitter, Musk fired half the workers at the company. Since the acquisition, Elon Musk has fired eighty percent of the company's workforce. During these purges, the company's trust and safety team, responsible for preventing the dissemination of harmful content, was gutted to fewer than 20 full-time employees. To balance exodus of employees he caused, Musk had to bring in 130 people from his other companies to work for X. This also had long-lasting repercussions. After years of negotiation, Musk settled in 2025 with the workers he fired in 2022. While the

settlement amount was kept secret, Kate Conger, a reporter for The New York Times, says the settlement amount "would cover almost all of the severance payments for workers involved in the case, including interest."

Under Musk, the platform also spread a surge of hate speech and misinformation. Consequently, more than half of the app's one thousand advertisers left the platform. In 2025, X's CEO Linda Yaccarino left the company. Her resignation came after Musk *personally* made the decision to sell X to xAI. Lou Paskalis, a friend of Yaccarino and the CEO of AJL Advisory, an advertising consulting company, commented that Yaccarino's departure "was an inevitability when X got layered under xAI." Her resignation also came after Grok, xAI's chatbot, made multiple antisemitic statements. Yaccarino had been crucial to the platform because, while she was in charge, more than 96 percent of big advertisers returned. However, Musk continued to push his agenda.

After the acquisition was announced in April 2022, Musk commented, "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy." He also claimed he would bring free speech to the platform, claiming he would make it the "digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated." One way Musk says he has enabled freedom of speech is through unbanning controversial Twitter accounts on what he calls "Freedom Fridays." Another way he has claimed to promote free speech was through loosening content moderation.

The problem is that Musk's concept of "universal" free speech seemingly did not apply to those who disagreed with him or were perceived as threats to his interests. Just weeks after completing the deal, Musk suspended the account @ElonJet, which had been created and operated by journalist Jack Sweeny to track the movements of Musk's private jet. Musk also suspended the accounts of multiple other journalists who reported on his business dealings. He suspended those accounts on at least five occasions, each time because the reporting was critical of him, his allies, or causes he supports.

While truly free speech on the platform was diluted Musk's own actions, free speech was also weakened through the inner workings of X's algorithms. A field experiment released by Nature found that after the acquisition, "the algorithm promot[ed] conservative content and demot[ed] posts by traditional media." Another research article, presented in 2025, assessed content recommendations during the 2024 presidential election; researchers found that X's algorithm promoted and prioritized right-leaning accounts. Moreover, they observed that the default-shown pages of new accounts also skewed right.

In yet another misstep, in November 2022, Musk also changed the verification system, making it available through a simple paid subscription. Previously, verified users had to prove their identity, only after which they would receive the coveted blue check mark next to their usernames. After Musk's change, *any* user could *pay* to *appear* reputable, and that's exactly what happened. CBS News described what ensued as "a wave of celebrity and corporate impersonators on its platform who have quickly gamed the company's new paid verification system, hours after its launch." The European Union even brought charges against X for

deceiving users and a lack of transparency. The European Union claimed, "[Paid verification] negatively affects users' ability to make free and informed decisions about the authenticity of the accounts and the content they interact with."

On the moderation front, Musk had previously posted a promise that "negative/hate tweets will be max deboosted & demonitized." While that statement might seem reassuring, the data do not support it. One 2025 study reported that after Musk's purchase, "the weekly rate of hate speech [was] approximately [50 percent] higher than the months preceding his purchase." The study also found the increase in hate speech was observed across multiple genres – racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Troublingly, the study revealed that engagement with these posts increased, finding hateful posts accumulated double the amount of "likes."

Another one of Musk's promises was to "defeat the spam bots." The same study notes that there had been no decrease in bot activity, and in reality, there may have been "a possible increase." In 2024, Forbes reporter Paul Tassi wrote, "while there might be fewer crypto bots in his replies now, there are now porn bots telling users there are 'nudes in their bios' under almost every tweet."

In the face of mountains of malicious content, Musk did not step back and fix the app. Instead, Musk decided to double down and act as if he and X were the victims. After the Center for Countering Digital Hate reported on the hate speech and misinformation proliferating on X, Musk filed a lawsuit against the CCDH for costing the company advertising revenue. The case was dismissed on the grounds that the lawsuit itself violated free speech. And remember Musk's "Freedom Fridays," Musk's unfreezing of previously suspended accounts in the name of "free speech"? As of March 2026, of the 1,100 accounts he unbanned, a third have already violated community guidelines.

Musk's chatbot Grok has also raised troubling issues. In May 2025, it began responding to users' questions with comments portraying as fact a "white genocide" in South Africa, even though most of the questions were not about South Africa. This was just the beginning of the storm. Grok spread multiple antisemitic statements, including praising Hitler. When Grok was questioned about its values, it responded by calling itself "MechaHitler." (The morning after antisemitic comments reached their peak is when Linda Yaccarino resigned.) In another instance, Grok seemed to be using and reflecting Musk's stances. When asked about its opinions on controversial topics, Grok would search X to see if Musk had already posted about the topic.

And in 2026, Grok created sexualized images of minors and women without their consent. One experiment by AI Forensics, a company that uncovers digital rights violations, analyzed 20,000 random images generated by Grok AI. AI Forensics found that 53 percent of images included individuals in minimal amounts of clothing. Of this 53 percent, 81 percent were women. In the same study, two percent of the images were of people 18 or younger.

One thing is consistent among all these controversies: Musk has been and continues to be at the center of them. Back when Elon Musk changed the name of Twitter to X, the BBC described it as “an extended act of cultural vandalism.”

He ordered the firing of 80 percent of his workers, he suspended journalists who dared to report information perceived to counter his beliefs and interests, and he seems to have programmed his own views into Grok AI. Spread out over months and years, these actions show continuous misuse of power and poor business judgment. In the process of creating a “digital haven” for free speech, Musk instead created a Wild West of chaos and disinformation. Musk promised an “everything app,” but all that came from it was every possible disaster.