

Opinion

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# A volcanic change in social-media landscape

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With his purchase of Twitter, whose San Francisco headquarters are pictured, Elon Musk bought not only a technology company but a community. (AP Photo / Jeff Chiu, File)

By [Jevin West](#)

*Special to The Times*

A pilgrimage to Mount St. Helens is a Northwest tradition. My family and I made the trek this past summer. From the Windy Ridge Viewpoint, we could see both the destruction and the emergence of a new mountain. We could see the mats of denuded trees but also the prairie lupine pushing through the dry pumice.

The same kind of volcanic eruption and resulting rebuild is happening in the social-media landscape.

Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter in late October began a series of events that has irreversibly altered not only Twitter but also the broader social-media landscape. As my colleague, Joe Bak-Coleman, [recently wrote in Scientific American](#), running "Twitter is not rocket science — it is harder." Half of Twitter's employees have been fired; "verified" blue-check accounts have promoted fake, computer generated people; and previously banned accounts, with their followers, have returned to the platform.

Alternative social-media platforms have flourished in this time of flux. Mastodon now [boasts 2.5 million active monthly users](#) and continues to grow. Hive Social recently [reported 250,000 new users signed up in one night](#). And this is only two of many others.

Social media is splintering, but this and the latest tech-sector layoffs may create opportunities of innovation. We will see new services built on top of these platforms — some open source and some profit-driven. (Chronological news feeds may be the default rather than the 10-click option.) We may even see successful platforms that aren't ad-driven. But we may also see more polarization. Social islands could get smaller and more isolated. The connected world of shared realities may just be a dream of the 1990s internet.

I have seen this splintering both in my personal and professional networks. At the Center for an Informed Public at the University of Washington, we collect social-media data to better understand how misinformation and disinformation spread online. We

**compare intervention strategies** and **build rapid networks** for slowing the spread of misinformation. Most of our data comes from Twitter because of its availability to researchers and because of the central role that Twitter has played in public communication. Over the last few years, we have been expanding to other platforms, just as producers and consumers of social-media data are expanding to other platforms.

Many have been writing Twitter epitaphs, but Twitter will likely not crater. Users have left; some have split their time with new platforms; and some have put their accounts asleep indefinitely. Still, there are millions of users and most influencers who have accumulated city-sized followings are not ready to give up their social capital. Even if Twitter does implode, the recent movement and exploration onto other platforms is enough to start seeing new communities and communication habits forming.

Free-speech absolutists have cheered the changes. Former content moderators have sent warning flares. The question is whether the changes chase off the community that drew the world's eyes to Twitter; whether Musk discovers a business model that is not ad-driven; whether an ad-driven platform can be anything but an outrage machine; whether misinformation and disinformation travel further in these new environments; and, importantly, whether society becomes more or less polarized.

The big questions will take time to sort out, but it is the smaller questions that are most pertinent. Should my organization open a Mastodon account? How many social-media accounts do we need to manage and which ones matter? At what point do we stop using our Twitter account? How should our emergency communication strategies change if Twitter goes away? Researchers who study social media, including those on our team, don't have clear answers to these questions.

Before hitting the panic button, it is worth remembering that Twitter users constitute a small portion of the population, especially when you look at active users creating content. According to a November 2020 Pew Research Center study, only about a quarter of U.S. adults are on Twitter and a **small percentage of these people**, about 10%, are content creators. However, this group includes journalists, government leaders, researchers, cultural icons and business leaders. It is a small but influential group.

On paper, Musk bought a technology company. In reality, he bought a community. If that community leaves or fractures, the technology is not worth much. Prediction markets are probably struggling with what the social network will look like in even six months, but one thing is for sure: like Mount St. Helens, the social-media landscape was forever

changed with the Musk eruptive approach. Right now, I am seeing a lot of pumice but hoping to eventually see prairie lupines.

*Jevin West is a co-founder of the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public and an associate professor at the UW Information School.*

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