The Billionaire and the Anarchists

Tracing Twitter from Its Roots as a Protest Tool to Elon Musk's Acquisition

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Elon Musk has taken possession of Twitter, claiming he will make it "a common digital town square." What kind of town square is owned by a single plutocrat? The square in a company town—or in a monarchy. What will this mean for ordinary people who depend on platforms like Twitter to communicate and organize in the digital age?

Resolving Tensions within the Ruling Class

The conflicts that played out *within* the capitalist class during Trump's presidency effectively pitted an upstart coalition of nationalists and old-money capitalists (such as the oil lobby) against the partisans of neoliberal business as usual, exemplified by the vast majority of Silicon Valley. If not for these intra-class conflicts, Trump's effort to consolidate control of the US government for his particular brand of nationalist authoritarianism might have already succeeded. Grassroots movements spearheaded resistance to Trump's policies and street-level support, but Silicon Valley also took a side, culminating with Twitter booting Trump off their platform in the wake of the bungled coup attempt of January 6. This underscored what had already been clear since summer 2020: Trump had not built up enough support among the capitalist class to maintain his grip on power.

What if Trump had been able to make common cause with a critical mass of Silicon Valley billionaires? Would things have turned out differently? This is an important question, because the three-sided conflict between nationalists, neoliberals, and participatory social movements is not over.

To put this in vulgar dialectical terms:

Thesis: Trump's effort to consolidate an authoritarian nationalism
Antithesis: opposition from neoliberal tycoons in Silicon Valley
Synthesis: Elon Musk buys Twitter

Understood thus, Musk's acquisition of Twitter is not just the whim of an individual plutocrat—it is also a step towards resolving some of the contradictions within the capitalist class, the better to establish a unified front against workers and everyone else on the receiving end of the violence of the capitalist system. Whatever changes Musk introduces, they will surely reflect his class interests as the world's richest man.

Of all the social media giants—and despite Trump's notorious presence on the platform—Twitter's administrators were arguably less accommodating to Trump's agenda than those of Facebook or Youtube. Whereas Mark Zuckerberg met repeatedly with Trump and his far-right supporters like Tucker Carlson, and Facebook and Instagram granted far-right demands to ban anarchists and anti-fascists from their platforms, Twitter banned fascists at least as readily as they banned anarchists and other activists. At the time, we speculated that this might be because Twitter was still effectively under the management of some of the original founders.

Here, we'll trace Twitter from its grassroots origins as a protest tool for activists to the Musk acquisition, sketching out a history of the capitalist takeover of the internet in microcosm.

Innovation and Cooptation

With Musk's purchase of Twitter, we see the conclusion of a cycle of innovation and cooptation in the field of communications. In the late 20th century, the dominant political and technological models were monolithic and unidirectional: network television, mass-based political parties. In response, anarchists and other rebels experimented with independent media and underground networks, producing innovative horizontal and decentralized models like indymedia.org. Tech corporations eventually monetized these models as the participatory media of Web 2.0, such as Facebook. Yet from the turn of the century through the uprising of 2020, the lingering horizontal and participatory aspects of the internet in general and social media in particular continued to empower those who sought to achieve more self-determination—witness the "Thank you Facebook" graffiti in Tunisia after the so-called "Arab Spring" uprisings of 2010-2011.

Over the past decade, however, corporations and governments have introduced more and more online surveillance and control. Musk's acquisition of Twitter is the latest stage in a reactionary clampdown with grim implications.

Musk and his colleagues see capitalism as a meritocracy in which the shrewdest and most hardworking competitors inexorably rise to the top. Hence, presumably, their own success.

Of course, if Musk wishes to prove that his success is not just the consequence of privilege and luck—of *fortune* and *good fortune*—he could demonstrate this easily enough by giving away his wealth, cutting his social ties, changing his name, and repeating his supposed rags-to-riches feats a second time. If he were able to climb the pyramid a second time without the benefit of growing up white in apartheid-era South Africa (setting aside the question of his father's emerald investments for now), we might have to grant a hearing to his claims that the market has elevated him on account of his personal qualities—though that still would not show that capitalism rewards the efforts that are most *beneficial* for humanity.

According to the Silicon Valley narrative, platforms like Twitter are the inventions of individual entrepreneurs, propelled into being by the finance capital of canny investors.

But Twitter did not simply spring, fully formed like Athena, from the head of company cofounder Jack Dorsey. In fact, it was a modest refinement of a model already demonstrated by TXTmob, the SMS text messaging program developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy for protests at the 2004 Democratic and Republican National Conventions.[1] Blaine Cook and Evan Henshaw-Plath, anarchist developers who worked alongside Dorsey at his

[1] We could go back even further to the protests at the summit of the European Union in Gothenburg, June 14-16, 2001, during which some participants organized a "communicationcentral" using a crude program to mass-distribute SMS messages. Everyone could subscribe to the service, but the infrastructure was not decentralized, which made it vulnerable. The police carried out a raid and eight people served a year or more apiece behind bars. Similar raids followed during protests at the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul and the 2009 G20 summit in Pittsburgh before the authorities shifted from trying to prosecute those providing information to the general public during protests to targeting those who inadvertently gave away too much information about themselves via social media.

previous company Odeo, helped refine TXTmob and later took the model with them into the conversations with Dorsey that gave rise to Twitter.[2]

If the unrelenting urgency of social media in general and Twitter in particular can be exhausting, that's to be expected—the infrastructure of Twitter was originally designed for street communications during high-stakes mass mobilizations in which information must go out immediately, boiled down to its bare essentials. It's not a coincidence that, despite its shortcomings, the platform has continued to be useful to street activists and conflict journalists.

The point here is that innovative models do not necessarily emerge from the commercial entrepreneurism of the Great Men of history and economics. More often, they emerge in the course of collective efforts to solve one of the problems created by the capitalist order. Resistance is the motor of history. Afterwards, opportunists like Musk use the outsize economic leverage that a profit-driven market grants them to buy up new technologies and turn them definitively against the movements and milieux that originally produced them.

We can identify two stages in the capitalist appropriation of the TXTmob model. In the first phase, a framework that was originally designed by volunteers for the use of ordinary protesters was transformed into a publicly traded corporation, around the same time that the open spaces of the early internet were being colonized by the for-profit surveillance systems of Web 2.0. In the second phase, this publicly traded corporation has been transformed into the private plaything of a single entitled tycoon—with consequences that remain to be seen.

Musk claims that his goal is to open up the platform for a wider range of speech. In practice, there is no such thing as "free speech" in its pure form—every decision that can shape the conditions of dialogue inevitably has implications regarding who can participate, who can be heard, and what can be said. For all we might say against them, the previous content moderators of Twitter did not prevent the platform from serving grassroots movements. We have yet to see whether Musk will intentionally target activists and organizers or simply permit reactionaries to do so on a crowdsourced basis, but it would be extremely naïve to take him at his word that his goal is to make Twitter *more* open.

The Billionaire versus the Anarchists

Imagine that you do not believe that Elon Musk deserves to have more power over what occurs on Twitter than the roughly 238 million people who use it today. For the purposes of this thought experiment, imagine that you believe that *no one* deserves to have such disproportionate power over the means via which human beings communicate with each other. In other words, imagine that you are an anarchist.

What can you do to ensure that people can control the technologies that connect us? Can you establish new platforms that answer directly to those who use them? More importantly,

[2] According to an account by Evan Henshaw-Plath and Harry Halpin, "Although Twitter received early favorable coverage from venture capital magazines such as TechCrunch and an outburst of usage around the San Francisco earthquake in August 2006, it still only had 5000 users—the same as TxtMob—by September 2006." It didn't take off until the 2007 SXSW conference.

can you popularize those, drawing users away from the closed playpens of corporate social media? Can you draw people together in other forums, spaces that can't be bought and controlled by billionaires?

Effectively, Musk's acquisition of Twitter returns us to the 1980s, when the chief communications media were entirely controlled by big corporations. The difference is that today's technologies are participatory rather than unidirectional: rather than simply seeing newscasters and celebrities, we see representations of each other, carefully curated by those who run the platforms. If anything, this makes the pretensions of social media to represent the wishes of society as a whole more insidiously persuasive than the spectacles of network television could ever be.

Twitter itself is likely a lost cause, but we should not hastily cede any territory via which we might communicate and organize against our oppressors. In a globally networked world, our adversaries in governments, corporations, and reactionary movements will continue to take advantage of digital technology to act with speed and coordination. We can't afford not to do the same, even if in the long run we seek much richer forms of connection than anything that digital technology can provide.

It's you against the billionaires. At their disposal, they have all the wealth and power of the most formidable empire in the history of the solar system. All you have going for you is your own ingenuity, the solidarity of your comrades, and the desperation of millions like you. The billionaires succeed by concentrating power in their own hands at everyone else's expense. For you to succeed, you must demonstrate ways that *everyone* can become more powerful. Two principles confront each other in this contest: on one side, individual aggrandizement at the expense of all living things; on the other, the potential of the individual to increase the self-determination of all human beings, all living creatures.

The good news is that their narrative about where innovation comes from is a lie. Anarchists had more to do with the origins of Twitter than plutocrats like Musk. We can create new platforms, new points of departure for connection, new strategies for changing the world. We have to.

Further Reading

- Deserting the Digital Utopia
- Surviving the Social Media Crackdown
- From Indymedia to Tahrir Square —The Revolutionary Origins of Status Updates on Twitter
- From TXTMob to Twitter
- TXTmob and Twitter
- Plantery.social

find each other.

edist.ro
anti-copyright
creative commons zero (cc-0)
do whatever you want

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