

What was good about Twitter

The eulogies began when Musk took over. What are we mourning?

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In the days after billionaire Elon Musk finalized his deal to buy Twitter, many users expressed their sense that the end of the platform was nigh.

This included the virtue signaling that is standard whenever a social media company makes an unpopular change: people loudly declare their intention to leave on moral grounds but usually stick around. But for others, a Twitter led by Musk—a self-declared “free speech absolutist”—was genuinely untenable. They envisioned a site where hate speech of every flavor would be allowed to run amok, and they opted out. And indeed, the use of the N-word on Twitter increased 500 percent in the first 12 hours after Musk took over. Twitter, the first social media platform to ban Donald Trump for his role in the January 6 insurrection, became under Musk the first to welcome him back.

Other Twitter users stayed, and they watched as Musk made a series of bad decisions that seemed to jeopardize Twitter's future—such as laying off half the staff, including key members of the security team. Among those still on Twitter, this was one of the first running jokes of the Musk era: Leave Twitter just because it's losing its infrastructure and is terribly understaffed? Babe, I'm an ER doctor; or, Babe, I'm a public school teacher. Babe, I volunteer at a church.

Twitter will likely stick around, in some form, a while longer. But what if it didn't? What would the 41 million people who use Twitter every day do in a post-Twitter world? In *Wired* magazine, tech writer Drew Austin suggests that if history is any indication, many would try their best to re-create what was best about Twitter by cobbling together other services.

But what *is* best about Twitter? After 16 years of tweeting, retweeting, and (more recently) quote tweeting, numerous studies have confirmed that living life on the internet is stressing us out. Social media usage is linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior. Twitter in particular has been bad at protecting its users from doxing—the act of posting someone's personal information with malicious intent. Twitter has also buttressed the creation of a post-truth culture: a 2018 MIT study found that lies spread on Twitter 10 to 20 times faster than facts.

Yet Twitter has also been a place where historically marginalized voices have been amplified. Research out of India has examined the ways Dalits use Twitter to inform others about their lived experience at the bottom of a caste system. Trans youth have used the platform to raise money for safe housing. Women on Twitter have exposed gender pay gaps and helped other women negotiate fair wages. If you've ever heard, uttered, or believed the phrase "Black lives matter," that's because of Twitter.

Most Twitter conversations are not going to change the world. But having the sort of conversation that Twitter, at its best, has fostered is often a necessary first step to creating real change. This democratization is what we need to take from Twitter and carry forward, whatever the future holds.