Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

Twitter

Everything I hate is on Twitter – how can the alternatives compete?



"And he couldn't do it. He could not die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here." The end of Philip Roth's Sabbath's Theater is how many of us felt about Twitter when Elon Musk bought it last October. But I didn't know that from reading it, even though I have; I knew that because someone faster, smarter, and probably younger (@hayleycampbell) put it on Twitter.

So even though everything I hate is there, so is a lot of what I love. My father never owned a TV because he said every time you thought you were good at something – cooking, being alive – on the TV, there'd be someone who was better at it than you. I thought that was just a consequence of a 40s childhood: the whole point of cooking and being alive is that the more people who can do it, the better. Also, I really wanted a TV.

Soon after Musk purchased Twitter, more of what I hated was there. Donald Trump was readmitted, and blue ticks were monetised, destroying trust in verification while not generating much revenue. Some staff quit, some were fired, and the pranks of the new owner – walking into HQ with a sink, an auto-response turd emoji to journalist enquiries – were startling. A rich enough man can erode workplace rights yet talk about the work ethic of his staff; he can engage the whole world in having the wrong conversation.

And for users, Twitter was rubbish. Long conversations I wasn't interested in flooded my timeline. How could this have been curated "for me" when I blocked it years ago? Was it just an algorithm for the middle-aged or a more precisely targeted harassment?

My direct messages were full of pretty avatars promoting a new scam. A young woman who wants to sell you some crypto but has just split up with her boyfriend and is drunk.

As alternatives to Twitter appeared, the question moved on: Mastodon ticked the right boxes politically. It can never be bought, is democratically moderated and is also nothing like horrible enough. There are more mature faults to find – it is more sparsely populated and the timelines are repetitive – but the main void is of cheerful spite.

Threads, Mark Zuckerberg's rival network tied to Instagram, overcame many of those early hurdles by having more money and being part of an existing platform: almost overnight, it had 100 million users. The new platform worked well, having scooped up many of Twitter's disgruntled employees.

These platforms, the competition and differences between them, and the mental investments we make to build them make me want to ask: what makes Wikipedia Wikipedia – an astonishing display of human cooperation and expertise – and Facebook Facebook – a place where people gather to drive each other into spasms of envy, delusion, and extremism? What is it about the funding models, the governance and the vision that creates such very different experiences from the same raw material: people participating? Is it as simple as the profit motive, and if so, why aren't all non-profit platforms better?

In one way, Musk did everyone a favour, teaching us how vulnerable Twitter was to the hooliganism of one ego, but we must figure out some solution better than "delete the app and find a hobby"; we don't need Zuckerberg to teach us that lesson twice

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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Write TRUE or FALSE according to the article.

1. The writer both loves and hater Twitter.
2. After Musk bought Twitter, the verification process improved.
3. The writer thinks Musk could create a more meaningful conversation with the world.
4. Suddenly, there was less irrelevant and more annoying content.
5. The writer was very happy about all the new messages from avatars.
6. The writer thinks how Mastodon is moderated is a good thing.
7. Threads had the advantage of being tied to Instagram and had millions of users overnight.
8. The writer believes that money is what makes these platforms very different.
9. The writer wants everyone to get off Twitter and find other things to do.

Choose the correct words from the wordpool below to match the definitions.

monetise enquiry Hooliganism curate target

1. To .....is to make money from something.
2. An..... is the process of asking a question.
3. .....is the actions of a violent person who causes damage in public spaces.
4. To ..... is to select content to be included in a collection or website
5. To ..... is to direct a product or advertising at someone.



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