

# Twitter will be a platform of free speech — if Elon Musk says so

By Paul Budde

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**It is a bit expensive, but if you are the richest man in the world, you can afford \$60 billion-plus to buy yourself a free speech outlet.**

This is just what prolific Twitterer [Elon Musk](#) has [done](#).

He was not happy with the way Twitter was managed and in the way it stops fake news provided by, for example, [Donald Trump](#) and other right-wing politicians. He also got into hot water in Canada on COVID-19 issues, [using an image of Hitler](#).

Musk also likes to use Twitter to bully his staff and make comments [about race and gender issues](#) that are at the least on the border of acceptability.

Elon made it very clear that he doesn't like most of the [senior staff at Twitter](#) and he most likely will sack them if they don't leave

voluntarily. Not a great start for a smooth transition.

Furthermore, with Twitter now being a private company, their salaries will no longer include shareholdings so he will have to pay them a lot more money.

Musk wants to get rid of some of the content moderation interventions in the name of free speech. It will be interesting to see how he will go with this as several politicians around the world have already pre-empted the change and have issued general warnings about the use of social media and that they will continue to enforce stamping out [fake news](#), conspiracy stories, racist and remarks and misogyny.

Of course, in a democratic context, we all like free speech. But the trouble is that a person like Elon Musk doesn't seem to understand that freedom of speech and expression is not absolute.

For Twitter to deserve public trust, it must be politically neutral, which effectively means upsetting the far right and the far left equally

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) [April 27, 2022](#)

[Wikipedia](#) lists as common limitations:

- libel;
- slander;
- obscenity;
- pornography;
- sedition;
- incitement;
- fighting words;
- classified information;
- copyright violation;
- trade secrets;
- food labelling;
- non-disclosure agreements;
- the right to privacy;
- dignity;
- the right to be forgotten;
- public security; and
- perjury.

Furthermore, there are also distinct differences between the private rights of free speech and public rights. The latter includes that media organisations – such as Twitter – can also be held responsible for the above list of limitations if these are breached.

Elon made some flippant comments like identifying everyone, open sourcing the algorithm and getting rid of bots — the question is if he realises how difficult this is and what sort of an impact this will have. Whether he likes it or not, he will need to moderate the service and moderation at scale is extremely difficult. Also, he talks about an algorithm (singular) while Twitter will use a whole range of algorithms.

If our twitter bid succeeds, we will defeat the spam bots or die trying!

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk)  
[April 21, 2022](#)

Some of his proposed changes will actually

undermine free speech. People that live under totalitarian regimes or are part of marginalised groups are protected by anonymity. They will have to stop using Twitter if they are going to be identified, otherwise, they will risk ending up in prisons or being vilified and threatened. Of course, you could make certain arrangements here, but this will need to be carefully considered.

It will also be interesting to see how advertisers will react to this. Will they accept the risk to have their advertisements next to some of those so-called free speech comments?

If he brings Twitter back to the time when it was used as the platform for Trump's undermining of democracy, Twitter will lose more credibility. Currently, the value of Twitter is mainly because of its use by politicians, world leaders, celebrities and so on. If Twitter becomes a threat to their own credibility, they will leave the service in droves.

In my opinion, it will only be a matter of time before Twitter and/or Musk will run into trouble as Elon Musk's ego will no doubt lead him into hot water here.

All of this will also have an effect on the success of Twitter. While he might be rich, his purchase package is partly loans secured by Twitter itself, but a big chunk is margin

loans against his [Tesla](#) stock. If Twitter doesn't generate enough cash to service that first set of loans, he's going to get margin calls which would force him to sell Tesla stock which he won't want to do.

Tesla's share price [immediately dropped](#) after his acquisition of Twitter. If this drops further, he might have a problem meeting his financial obligations. There is now much more competition in the EV market and this will have an effect on the future of Tesla.

Furthermore, Twitter has so far not done a good job in making money and it is hard to see that Musk will be able to turn that around.

I have been an admirer of Musk and to a certain extent, I still am. He has done a wonderful job for e-cars, his space ventures are awe-inspiring, but I think this is an absolutely giant step backwards for free speech online.

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