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The Great Delusion Behind Twitter

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For what feels like ages, we've been told that Twitter is, or needs to be, the world's town square. That was Dick Costolo's line in 2013, when he was Twitter's chief executive ("We think of it as the global town square"), and Jack Dorsey, one of Twitter's founders, used it, too, in 2018 ("People use Twitter as a digital public square"). Now the line comes from the "chief twit," Elon Musk ("The reason I acquired Twitter is because it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital town square").

This metaphor is wrong on three levels.

First, there isn't, can't be and shouldn't be a "global town square." The world needs many town squares, not one. Public spaces are rooted in the communities and contexts in which they exist. This is true, too, for Twitter, which is less a singular entity than a digital multiverse. What Twitter is for activists in Zimbabwe is not what it is for gamers in Britain.

Second, town squares are public spaces, governed in some way by the public. That is what makes them a town square rather than a square in a town. They are not the playthings of whimsical billionaires. They do not exist, as Twitter did for so long, to provide returns to shareholders. (And as wild as Musk's reign has already been, remember that he tried to back out of this deal, and Twitter's leadership, knowing he neither wanted the service nor would treat it or its employees with care, forced it through to ensure that executives and shareholders got their payout.) A town square controlled by one man isn't a town square. It's a storefront, an art project or possibly a game preserve.

Third, what matters for a polity isn't the mere existence of a town square but the condition the townspeople are in when they arrive. Town squares can host debates. They can host craft fairs. They can host brawls. They can host lynchings. Civilization does not depend on a place to gather. It depends on what happens when people gather.

So much genius and trickery and money have gone into a mistaken metaphor. The competition to create and own the digital square may be good business, but it has led to terrible politics. Think of the hopeful imaginings that accompanied the early days of social media: We would know one another across time and space; we would share with one another across cultures and generations; we would inform one another across borders and factions. Billions of people use these services. Their scale is truly civilizational. And what have they wrought? Is the world more democratic? Is G.D.P. growth higher? Is innovation faster? Do we seem wiser? Do we seem kinder? Are we happier? Shouldn't something, anything, have gotten noticeably better in the short decades since these services fought their way into our lives?

I think there is a reason that so little has gotten better and so much has gotten worse. It is this: The cost of so much connection and information has been the deterioration of our capacity for attention and reflection. And it is the quality of our attention and reflection that matters most.

In a recent paper, Benjamin Farrer, a political scientist at Knox College in Illinois, argues that we have mistaken the key resource upon which democracy, and perhaps civilization, depends. That resource is attention. But not your attention or my attention. Our attention. Attention, in this sense, is a collective resource; it is the depth of thought and consideration a society can bring to bear on its most pressing problems. And as with so many collective resources, from fresh air to clean water, it can be polluted or exhausted.

Borrowing a concept from Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel in economic science, Farrer argues that attention is subject to a problem known as the tragedy of the commons. A classic example of a tragedy of the commons is an open pasture that any shepherd can use for his flock. Without wise governance, every shepherd will send his flock to graze, because if he doesn't, the other shepherds will do so first. Soon enough, the pasture is bare, and the resource is depleted.

Farrer argues that our collective attention is like a public pasture: It is valuable, it is limited, and it is being depleted. Everyone from advertisers to politicians to newspapers to social media giants wants our attention. The competition is fierce, and it has led to more sensationalism, more outrageous or infuriating content, more algorithmic tricks, more of anything that might give a brand or a platform or a politician an edge, even as it leaves us harried, irritable and distracted.

One telling study recruited participants across 17 countries and six continents and measured skin conductivity — a signal of emotional response — when participants saw positive, negative and neutral news. Negative news was, consistently, the most engaging. If you've ever wondered why the news is so focused on tragedy and conflict or why social media furnishes more outrage than inspiration, that's the reason. Negativity captures our attention better than positivity or neutrality.

This is not a new dynamic, and it is by no means unique to Twitter. "The mission of the press is to spread culture while destroying the attention span," Karl Kraus, the Austrian satirist, wrote in the early 1900s. But it is worse now. The tools available to those who would command our attention are far more powerful than in past eras.

Twitter's problems did not begin and will not end with Musk. They are woven into the fabric of the platform. Twitter makes it easy to discuss hard topics poorly. And it does that by putting its participants in the worst state of mind for a discussion.

Twitter forces nuanced thoughts down to bumper-sticker bluntness. The chaotic, always moving newsfeed leaves little time for reflection on whatever has just been read. The algorithm's obsession with likes and retweets means users mainly see (and produce) speech that flatters their community or demonizes those they already loathe. The quote tweet function encourages mockery rather than conversation. The frictionless slide between thought and post, combined with the absence of an edit function, encourages impulsive reaction rather than sober consideration. It is not that difficult conversations cannot or have not happened on the platform. It is more that they should not happen on the platform.

But they do. Of course they do. And this is what critics of the platform, including me, need to reckon with.

"The whole issue of police violence against Black people was fully exposed because of Twitter," Sherrilyn Ifill, a former president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, told me. "Because of videos of Walter Scott running in that park and Philando Castile and Freddie Gray and so many others. Presenting this incontrovertible evidence of the truth we'd been living with and that was so disparaged by white political leaders has forever transformed the conversation over public safety."

Twitter has real strengths, many of which are the flip side of its weaknesses. It is as flat a medium as any that has existed. It is as fast a medium as has ever existed; that can be maddening, but it can also draw attention to something that is happening and has to change right now. It is an unusually confrontational medium, and that has permitted movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to flower and for socialists to get a new hearing in American politics — and it has also, of course, given new succor and life to the racist right. Put simply, Twitter's value is how easy it makes it to talk. Its cost is how hard it makes it to listen.

It is a failure of imagination to think that our choice is the social media platforms we have now or nothing. I keep thinking about something that Robin Sloan, a novelist and former Twitter employee, wrote this year: "There are so many ways people might relate to one another online, so many ways exchange and conviviality might be organized. Look at these screens, this wash of pixels, the liquid potential! What a colossal bummer that Twitter eked out a local maximum, that its network effect still (!) consumes the fuel for other possibilities, other explorations."

What's surprised me most as Twitter has convulsed in recent weeks is how threadbare the social media cupboard really is. So many are open to trying something new, but as of yet, there's nothing that feels all that new to try. Everything feels like a take on Twitter. It may be faster or slower, more decentralized or more moderated, but they're all variations on the same theme: experiments in how to capture attention rather than deepen it, platforms built to encourage us to speak rather than to help us listen or think.

Permit me a weird turn here. I became interested this year in how Quakers deliberate. As a movement, Quakers have been far ahead of the moral curve time and again — early to abolitionism, to equality between the sexes, to prison reform, to pressuring governments to help save Jews from the Holocaust. That is not to say Quakers have gotten nothing wrong, but what has led them to get so much right?

The answer suggested by Rex Ambler's lovely book "The Quaker Way" is silence. In a typical Quaker meeting, Ambler writes, community members "sit in silence together for an hour or so, standing up to speak only if they are led to do so, and then only to share some insight which they sense will be of value to others." If they must decide an issue collectively, "they will wait in silence together, again, to discern what has to be done." There is much that debate can offer but much that it can obscure. "To get a clear sense of what is happening in our lives, we Quakers try to go deeper," he writes. "We have to let go our active and fretful minds in order to do this. We go quiet and let a deeper, more sensitive awareness arise."

I find this powerful in part because I see it in myself. I know how I respond in the heat of an argument, when my whole being is tensed to react. And I know how I process hard questions or difficult emotions after quiet reflection, when there is time for my spirit to settle. I know which is my better self.

Democracy is not and will not be one long Quaker meeting. But there is wisdom here worth mulling. We do not make our best decisions, as individuals or as a collective, when our minds are most active and fretful. And yet "active and fretful" is about as precise a description as I can imagine of the Twitter mind. And having put us in an active, fretful mental state, Twitter then encourages us to fire off declarative statements on the most divisive possible issues, always with one eye to how quickly they will rack up likes and retweets and thus viral power. It's insane.

And it will get so much worse from here. OpenAI recently released ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence system that can be given requests in plain language ("Write me an argument for the benefits of single-payer health care, in the style of a Taylor Swift song") and spit out remarkably passable results.

What ChatGPT can do is a marvel. We are at the dawn of a new technological era. But it is easy to see how it could turn dark — and quickly. A.I. systems like this make the production and manipulation of text (and code and images and eventually audio and video) functionally costless. They will be deployed to produce whatever makes us most likely to click. But these systems do not and cannot know what they are producing. The cost of creating and optimizing content that grabs our attention is plummeting, but the cost of producing valuable and truthful work isn't.

These are technologies that lend themselves to cacophony, not community. I fear a world in which the business models behind them run on our attention or profit off our anger. But other worlds and other models are possible.

A few weeks back, I spoke to Audrey Tang, Taiwan's minister of digital affairs. I asked her what it would mean for social media to be run democratically, given the mistrust many Americans have — and for good reason — of the state. (Imagine if the Trump administration had owned Twitter.) "Does the social sector mean anything in the American context?" she asked me.

By the social sector, Tang meant what we sometimes call civil society — the layer of associations and organizations between the government and the market. In Taiwan, key parts of digital infrastructure are managed at this level. The PTT Bulletin Board System, which she described as Taiwan's Reddit, if Reddit were far more central to social and political life, is still owned by the student group that started it. It was part of how Taiwan responded so early and so effectively to the coronavirus. "It has no shareholders," Tang said. "No advertisers. It is entirely within the academic network. It's entirely open source. It's entirely community governed. People can freely join it. It's a public digital space."

It sounded like utopia to me, before I remembered that a key part of our digital infrastructure is run similarly. Wikipedia remains one of the most-visited sites on the web, and it is owned and managed by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation. It shows. Wikipedia has never tried to become more than it is. It never pivoted to video or remade itself around an algorithmic feed in order to harvest more of our attention. It is a commons but one that is governed so we may use it rather than so that it may use us. It gives so much more than it takes. It thrives, quietly and gently, as a reminder that a very different internet, governed in a very different way, intended for a very different purpose, is possible.

There are those who believe the social web is reaching its terminal point. I hope they're right. Platform after platform was designed to make it easier and more addictive for us to share content with one another so the corporations behind them could sell ever more of our attention and data. In different ways, most of these platforms are now in decline.

What if the next turn of the media dial was measured not by how much attention we gave to a platform but by how much it gave to us? I am not sure what such a service would look like. But I am hungry for it, and I suspect a lot of other people are, too.

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