

Loving Twitter and leaving it

It was wonderful. My life is meaningfully better without it.

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At the beginning of November, I quit Twitter. I first joined the site in 2013, periodically taking temporary breaks for one reason or another but otherwise being a daily, or many-times-daily, user. (I once accidentally deactivated long enough that my first account was permanently deleted; I created a new one.)

When I quit for good, I wasn't making any statement about Elon Musk's new ownership, though [I did write about some concerns in these pages](#) earlier this year. While I wasn't excited to advance whatever his goals were in buying the platform, even in my miniscule way, my reasons for leaving were entirely personal.

Weeks later, Twitter appears to be in trouble. Musk's mass layoffs and subsequent erratic behavior have reportedly left the company with significant gaps. A doomed subscription experiment allowing anyone to get a verified user badge allowed, for example, a "verified" but fake Eli Lilly account to announce that insulin would be free and a similar Nintendo account to tweet out an image of Mario giving everyone the middle finger. Advertisers, who provide most of Twitter's revenue, were pausing or fleeing altogether.

Watching this happen from the sidelines, in news accounts and screenshots, almost made me regret logging out for good. The flamboyant chaos looked, well, fun.

Maybe Twitter will make it through this patch and continue much as it has been. Or perhaps it will fail more dramatically, or limp along as a diminished thing. Even if I knew something about the workings of the site that I do not, I'm not writing today to bury Twitter, but to praise it.

If you have never been a Twitter user, or if you abandoned an account after not really getting to enjoy it, I would explain the appeal like this: imagine a worldwide cocktail party for people who are bad at cocktail parties. While some platforms and tech companies turned early popularity and desirable user bases into dominant or diversified corporate behemoths, Twitter was always something of a niche product. YouTube took video, Instagram took photos, and Facebook took all your relatives. Twitter, though it accommodated images well, was fundamentally a text-based format.

This made it a comfortable medium for high-verbal nerds who didn't want to post sunsets or videos of themselves; they wanted to type. The posts were necessarily short, so it was especially useful for certain kinds of content: breaking news updates, jokes, banter, rapid-fire arguments, aphorisms, exaggerated claims, and context-free provocation. It allowed and thrived on an astonishing degree of freewheeling collaboration, as a meme or phrase or set of ideas was endlessly remixed, tweaked, and combined with other discourses.

For a few days, the people I followed on Twitter, and the people they followed and re-tweeted into my own timeline, spoofed countless times on the William Carlos Williams poem "This is Just to Say." You would never imagine how many loony variations on "I have eaten the plums" can be made until you saw people doing it and jumped in to try your own. (My contribution, as I recall, began "I have stolen the

pears” and ended up as a joke about Augustine inventing self-consciousness.)

The tweet is a format with its own kinds of excellence, and surprising people are good at it. Mr. T is an excellent poster. Donald Trump, whatever else one can say about him, was very good at using Twitter. Joyce Carol Oates. Anonymous accounts with ridiculous names. Interestingly enough, Elon Musk himself is notably bad at Twitter. If you tweeted a joke at the expense of The Band, Robbie Robertson might jump in to trash you. Gerry Adams couldn't offer a dad-like lament about Christmas lights without [getting, as they said on Twitter, roasted](#). Even Amtrak posting a wholesome Emerson quote [wasn't safe](#).

For someone like me, who has always been most comfortable mediating my relationships with the wider world through a keyboard, it was glorious. It was like having a sweet tooth honed on bananas and suddenly discovering high fructose corn syrup—in a 24-hour test kitchen where everyone in the world who shares my affliction is making and consuming new things together.

Friendships formed on Twitter (and ended there). Professional, academic, and religious communities gathered and intermingled there. It was a uniquely powerful source for breaking news and quick analysis, good and bad. It facilitated previously impossible group experiences, as the whole English-speaking world could watch Irish travelers come home for the referendum legalizing same-sex marriage (which I followed while I was up with a sick child). And it mattered well beyond its relatively modest base of daily users because those daily users wrote so many of the news articles, television shows, political speeches, and podcasts consumed by the rest of us. There was, and is, nothing else like it.

There was, of course, a massive dark side to all of this. When I joined in 2013, harassment was rife and the platform was widely known to be congenial to neo-Nazis, antisemites, and all kinds of fringe tendencies. The company found ways to purge ISIS-sympathizing accounts. There were crackdowns on hate speech after Charlottesville and on conspiracy-related accounts after the attack on the Capitol. While it was never close to perfect, these more aggressive moderation regimes made the site much more congenial to users like me, for whom White supremacist accounts were a mere nuisance. For people who suffered harassment, death threats, and doxing, Twitter's evolution was necessary for their very presence on the site.

But while no forum can exist without rules, every regime of moderation will create its own problems. Many right-leaning Twitter users, no longer having to react to statements by Donald Trump or White nationalist figures, had the opportunity and the necessity to workshop more palatable rhetoric. Instead of offering a judgment on the substance of Kanye West's antisemitic conspiracy theories, they could object that his free speech had been violated when Twitter suspended him. If you wonder why our public conversation changed so drastically between Charlottesville and the critical race theory panic of 2021, the answer is partly that Twitter pushed overtly racist content out of the limelight rather effectively.

In parallel, an ideological hothouse developed among progressives on Twitter that was probably not good for their real-world politics. Some very exotic ideologies had room to grow. (You can live a whole life without ever encountering an honest-to-goodness Stalinist, but you can find them on Twitter.) Conventions of thought and rhetoric became stifling, and in general people risked confusing the left-leaning composition of Twitter's user base with the political terrain of the world outside.

Twitter is a uniquely wonderful place to encounter and play with ideas, make jokes, find news stories, learn about and make arguments, and discover communities sharing a niche interest. But it turns out that all this mixing up news, jokes, intellectual arguments, earnest activism, narrow obsessions, and verbal tomfoolery isn't really healthy for any of those things individually. Social media long ago drenched the hours we might once have spent twiddling our thumbs at the airport or waiting for the dentist with limitless content, but Twitter was particularly skilled at instantly juxtaposing a meme of a weightlifting dog with news of a horrific earthquake with an irritating reply to a post about the Eucharist. The loss of time and focus aside, I wonder how much damage my ability to distinguish serious from silly, urgent from hyperbolic, and relevant from random has suffered.

Twitter was a remarkably catholic assembly of weird outliers. For me, this mostly meant encountering Christians of various persuasions who were not well represented in major media or in my own social circles. Meeting and often befriending Catholic traditionalists, Anglican Marxists, and Orthodox LGBTQ people—not to mention people between affiliations or blending their religious identity with some liturgical or political fascination—helped me understand myself and the diversity of ways Christianity is expressed and synthesized. It was also a way for me to get myself into some pointless arguments.

It was not, however, a good place to learn about or influence the median versions of Republicans, Democrats, Catholics, or anyone else. When I found myself arguing in my head with a “bishop” of an extreme fragment of the Orthodox Church about baptism, I knew that I needed to leave for my own sanity. You could spend endless time on people and arguments no one outside Twitter would even be aware of.

I learned long ago that my life is meaningfully better without Twitter. I’m more present, more able to focus on projects, better about staying in touch with people. Now when I have a dumb joke or risky political observation to make, I have to text it to a friend. I miss the validation that came from people liking, responding to, or sharing things I posted, and I *really* miss the relationships I formed there, some of which simply won’t transfer to any other medium. Like anything with even a shadow of real goodness to it, Twitter can’t be replaced.

But if the communities of conversation and activism that formed there have to disperse and find other ways to function, that’s probably for the best in the long run. It was always risky to house so much public discourse in one not-very-profitable private company. People who have clamored for Musk to loosen controls on hate speech and threats will be disappointed, too. Either he won’t change enough to satisfy them, or he will and Twitter will turn into a platform like Gab or Parler, a haven for bigotry and conspiracy theories that no normal people use. Or the whole platform will implode and everyone will have to find something else to do with their time.

In that case, I just got a head start. It was wonderful, I miss it, and I hope I never find anything like it again.