



Should we stay or should we go? Dilemmas arising from (new) corporate ownership of a digital public space

Jessica McLean^{a,*}, Randa Abdel-Fattah^a, Milena Bojovic^b, Andrew McGregor^a, Success Shaibu^a, Ben Spies-Butcher^a, Jonathan Symons^c

^a Macquarie School of Communication, Society and Culture, Macquarie University, Australia

^b Faculty of Design and Society, University of Technology Sydney

^c School of International Studies, Macquarie University

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ABSTRACT

If a chauvinistic troll billionaire takes control of a digital platform, enabling hate speech and tailoring algorithms around their whims, how should higher education institutional accounts respond? To consider this question, our paper uses a collaborative listening approach to navigate diverse positionings and political imperatives: it presents both collective analysis and individual authored reflections from seven members (faculty and PhD students) of a social science school at an Australian public university resulting from their iterative discussions. We take two moments as reference points: 1) changes in Twitter/X's culture following its takeover, and 2) the centrality of Twitter/X to public deliberation over, and resistance to, Israel's bombardment of Gaza following the Hamas attacks. We conclude that individual decisions about using digital platforms depend on the goals of engagement, that these goals are contingent, and that for-profit digital platforms are inherently paradoxical affective spaces. Resolving the tensions that users experience in these spaces may not be possible unless new digital platforms with different models of ownership and governance are created.

1. Introduction

Many academics operate Twitter/X accounts (individually or on behalf of our disciplines/research groups) in order to engage with the platform's community of users. In the years following its creation in 2006 positive "network effects" (Afuah, 2013) turned the platform into a public resource and a public space. Within the University sector, Twitter has been used as a teaching tool and space for students to share ideas (Tang & Hew, 2017), as well as a way for academics and students to build social networks, increase collegiality and learn about new research through a relatively horizontal medium (Breines et al., 2020; Eutsler et al., 2023; Lupton, 2014). Although this space was always owned by a private company, the platform was accessible to anyone who had the opportunity to use communication technologies and the capacity to maintain a digital presence. In October 2022, this business model changed. Under new ownership, a pattern of chauvinist decision-making produced a series of substantive cultural and technical changes that reconstructed the platform. Increasingly, X – as it is now called – amplified division and seemed open to far-right organising and hate-

speech (Milli et al., 2024). However, despite multiple efforts, there has been no single mass-defection to an alternative space of equivalent generative network effects even if Bluesky is emerging as a leading host for academic debate (Zheng et al., 2025).

Analysis of hate speech before and after Musk's purchase found that his posts and 'general rhetoric have a potential appeal to hateful users on Twitter' (Auten & Matta, 2024: 265). Auten and Matta studied three forms of hate speech on Twitter: white-nationalists/alt-right, anti-Semitism, and anti-LGBTQ. Their research revealed that those who shared Musk's posts were closely aligned with white-nationalist hate groups and 'hateful individuals' (Auten & Matta, 2024). How to respond? Withdrawal risks surrendering a valued 'public' resource – albeit a privately owned one – to reactionary forces. Yet, continued participation by individuals or institutional academic accounts risks complicity with a company that has abandoned responsibility for user safety and civic wellbeing. Research shows that a significant group of users has remained on X/Twitter but have become inactive, a form of passive withdrawal or inactive presence. For example, in a widely reported study of '380 000 environmentally oriented users, nearly 50% became inactive on Twitter

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jessica.mclean@mq.edu.au (J. McLean).

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after it was sold in October 2022' (Chang et al., 2023).

This article grew out of a series of conversations within a School of Social Sciences in Macquarie University, Dharug Country, Australia. Following Twitter's sale and rebranding (October 2022 and July 2023), and subsequent shift in the content that dominates the platform, a growing number of colleagues disengaged from the platform. After a discussion at a School meeting on August 2, 2023, staff agreed that our institutional accounts – run on behalf of the School and three of the Disciplines within it – should stop engaging on the platform, at least temporarily, while leaving open how people managed their individual accounts. A small group, comprised of some of the authors of this paper, agreed to organise a public forum to discuss our response. This forum was held in November 2023, five weeks after October 7.

The article begins with a brief overview of our methodology and approach before canvassing the theoretical touchstones and context that we bring to bear on our individual and collective positions. We then share each of the contributions from members of the writing team and map out what we see as the main themes emerging from this piece in our discussion and conclusion.

2. Methodology and approach

To begin answering the questions prompting this paper, we developed a collaborative and reflective method (Baird, 2004; Christie et al., 2007) for thinking critically about our stances vis-à-vis X, taking into account our work as social media users and social sciences scholars. We adopted a collaborative approach that centres relational listening and reflection and sought to provide room for dialogue and enquiry so that each of our views could be expressed and heard, regardless of their content and line of argument (Christie et al., 2007). The themes that emerge from this relational listening were established by pursuing 'an iterative and reflective process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases' (Nowell et al., 2017:4). A relational approach is embedded in our paper and underpinned the many conversations leading up to the writing of this text. Members of the School, including academics and students, were all invited to express positions, to listen deeply (Ratnam, 2019) and respond to each other's views in care-full ways in a public forum (Frazer et al., 2022; Raghuram et al., 2009). As a result, there are diverging views within this piece but, at the same time, there is an overarching shared orientation to listening and responding respectfully, stemming from a collaborative and ad hoc collective effort to practice relationality (Kanngieser et al., 2024). We hoped relational listening would provide an antidote to the values and logics of X and, by deepening connections within our immediate community (Odell, 2020) would allow us to collectively negotiate the paradoxes of the digital platform. Indeed, relational listening as a methodology works better for this form of reflective work than many other qualitative approaches as it provides pathways for greater understanding of, and across, difference (Kanngieser et al., 2024).

As a group we discussed the issues relating to X/Twitter engagement across a series of eight meetings and one public forum, from September 2023 to June 2024, and through a writing process that involved an open call for written contributions to the deliberation, iterative circulation and revision of individual reflections with constant "moving back and forward between phases" (Nowell et al., 2017:4). The blurb for the public forum asked participants to "consider what kind of decisions we think we are making: as social scientists or as employees of the university? Are we showing leadership for our disciplines - which would imply that we are implicitly making a case that others should follow us? Or are we simply managing risk and resources and setting our own priorities? What logics and principles govern this decision? And what solidarities can and should inform our collective decisions? In short, should we stay or go on X/Twitter, or sit somewhere in between? Are there structural interventions open to universities that might construct less paradoxical spaces for public deliberation and so make this dilemma

less acute?. This paper documents and extends those conversations in anticipation that similar collectives may be considering the same dilemmas, although we note that how higher educational institutional X/Twitter accounts can and should function is not often studied. A notable exception to this observation is Gong and Lane (2019) who offer strategies for increasing the effectiveness of such geographic Twitter accounts. After compiling the different views below, we applied a collaborative critical and reflective analysis of each offering, to bring together a set of themes and tentative conclusions that we hope readers may find useful. The approach we adopt here is inspired by other collaborative reflective collectives such as those that track what it means to 'become a reading group' (Ey et al., 2020), and how to build a collective to strategically develop solidarity within intensely neoliberal higher education settings (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012).

Our collective includes the following members: Jess McLean, a white settler geographer who does research on human and more-than-human digital worlds; Randa Abdel-Fattah, a Palestinian Egyptian Muslim settler sociologist, author and activist; Milena Bojovic, a Serbian white settler who is¹ a PhD Candidate in geography and planning; Andrew McGregor, a white settler geographer who set up the School account and conducts research on humane and resilient food futures; Ben Spies-Butcher, a white settler sociologist and political economist; Success Shaibu, a black settler who researches urban planning; Jon Symons a white settler political scientist who researches sexuality and climate politics.

3. Context and theoretical touchstones – X/Twitter as a paradoxical affective space

We observe that within academic communities, and certainly others as well, there are mixed responses to the new ownership of Twitter and its transformation into X. Some academics insist that for so long as X is an important site for public meaning-making they should claim space within X. Others are wanting to continue activist campaigns that are associated with their research on the platform, or continue to use the platform to keep learning from peers and academic networks that are otherwise inaccessible (Kupferschmidt, 2022). Further arguments are that it is a mistake to gift intellectual labour and attention to a platform that is opening to hate speech oriented at harming minority groups, and still others argue that we should focus our attention on collectivizing ownership of digital/cloud infrastructure. Interestingly, 500,000 Twitter users migrated to Mastodon, a federated digital network that some thought might replace X/Twitter, soon after the ownership change (Kupferschmidt, 2022) and between the time of first submitting this paper in August 2024 and its publication in October 2025 Bluesky users have increased from approx 5.7 to 38 million. However, the widespread endorsement and usage of a replacement social media space seems elusive.

Questions of governance of X/Twitter, and how this shapes the way we use and interact with it, highlights how debates and controversies on (quasi-)public platforms 'are epistemic contexts', in and of themselves (Sandover et al., 2018, 117). That is, digital media platforms are not a way to understand un-mediated issues in the offline world but are contexts that generate meaning and knowledge, including structural oppressions (Giesecking, 2019). Digital media platforms play a role in shaping various publics and animate how publics convene, while individuals, institutions and communities assert and create presences in diverse ways (Bruns, 2019). Indeed, digital spaces like X/Twitter are increasingly central to the constitution of politicised spaces and offer opportunities to reach broad geographic audiences (McLean, 2020; Sandover et al., 2018). The potential benefits of these platforms are undermined when these spaces 'rules and algorithms promote hate

¹ Author 3 is now a full-time academic having successfully completed their PhD studies.

speech and derail genuine public debate.

The power relations behind Twitter's algorithmic mechanisms and the end-user tweets we see on screen (and create ourselves) warrant critical engagement as a way of understanding how digital media platforms contribute to shaping of public discourse overall (Sandover et al., 2018). This is because the "discursive practices" which emerge in response to algorithmic incentives themselves "hold and reconfigure power" (McLean, 2016, p. 512).

In Musk's X/Twitter, we could read the affordances of this digital platform as exhibiting qualities belonging to a 'paradoxical space,' a term elaborated by Rose (1993) and applied to social media by Mclean and Maalsen (2013) and Bardzell and Bardzell (2010). Feminist geographers describe paradoxical spaces as working against binary thinking: 'spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map - centre and margin, inside and outside - are occupied simultaneously' (Rose, 1993: 140). The paradoxical qualities of X/Twitter now are manifold. Musk bought the platform with a view to making it a 'digital public square' but has instituted restrictions on how people can access X if they are not paying for it, including how many tweets users can access. Even seeing what is on X/Twitter is only now possible for users who are logged in (O'Brien, 2023). More longstanding paradoxical features include the blurring of public issues and private identities to create ad hoc publics that emerge spontaneously with hashtag use (Brunns, 2019) and the personal publics that each individual creates and maintains in specific platforms that are 'at the boundary of private and public communication' (Brunns, 2023: 7).

Following Papacharissi (2016, 2022), we appreciate that emotions and affect contribute to storytelling and network creation and continuity in digital spaces such as X/Twitter, and recognize that much research has been done on this topic that we cannot fully explore here. We do note long-standing discussion of whether Twitter should be understood as a Habermasian 'public sphere' or as enabling formation of specific public spherules or issue publics (Brunns, 2023). Papacharissi (2016) tests out the possibility of describing social media platforms as public spheres and suggests that this does not hold owing to their algorithmic biases, fragmentation, and lack of independence from corporate control. Rather, Papacharissi (2016:321) suggests that '[u]nderstanding social media as structures of feeling, as soft structure of storytelling, permits us to examine them as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary.' In the contributions gathered here, there certainly is a blend of feeling, storytelling and meaning-making characterising our stances in our analysis of this particular paradoxical affective space.

4. Why Macquarie Social Sciences joined Twitter

The Macquarie School of Social Sciences was formed in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Former Departments of Anthropology, Geography and Planning, Politics and International Relations and Sociology were merged as part of a wider Faculty restructure. Morale was low and suspicions high as the pandemic wreaked havoc with people's lives and student enrolments. Instigation of a School twitter account in September 2021 (@socsci_mq) was one small effort toward creating a caring academic community within the new structure (see Eutsler et al., 2023). The account evolved into a space for promoting School and University events, sharing job and scholarship opportunities, welcoming students to teaching semesters, highlighting staff and student achievements, and sharing recent publications and other research initiatives. We purposively developed an identity that celebrated success and facilitated the flow of information by following, liking, and retweeting disciplinary and individual staff and student accounts (Voss & Kumar, 2013). Twitter was chosen as it was the most common platform for academic accounts, with three of the four disciplines in the School already hosting accounts, alongside many individual staff accounts. @socsci_mq built from these existing accounts and provided a vehicle for communicating between and connecting staff and disciplines in the newly formed School, while

also broadcasting School activities and achievements to external actors in an easily accessible way. Anyone with a smartphone and internet access could read Twitter, regardless of whether you created an active account on the site or not, unlike Facebook and Instagram, for example, where accounts were, and still, are required.

The future of @socsci_mq came to a head in a School meeting, and subsequent forum, when the ethics of contributing to twitter in its new and more commercially rapacious form were discussed. Should the School be providing free labour, and possible financial contributions, to create and promote content for an increasingly hostile platform? The yes case could point out that the original goals of @socsci_mq, to build community, share knowledge and contribute to a caring and collegial environment, are still possible, even if those capacities are being more blatantly monetised or degraded. The no case emphasised both the ethical reasons to withdraw our labour and attention from an increasingly chauvinist platform and the declining effectiveness of @socsci_mq unless we pay a regular fee to a company that was making an already problematic platform even less equal, democratic and safe. An initial decision to suspend the @socsci_mq was reached. However, in the wake of the October 7th attacks, that decision came into question. Some advocated developing processes to reinvent the school account in a more activist mode that would support colleagues doing advocacy work on Twitter.

5. Reflections

Our ad hoc collective deliberation on X/Twitter began with a series of meetings and a workshop, after which we invited interested participants to circulate written reflections on the questions and themes that had been discussed, and then to revise them again after reading other reflections. The order of presentation was chosen randomly.

5.1. Author 3

As a PhD candidate still learning to navigate the world of research and public engagement, I find X to be a valuable resource, especially as my doctoral studies commenced during the global pandemic, which meant I had limited opportunities to interact with people and colleagues at my institution in person. I turned to the online sphere to extend my learnings beyond journal articles and online meetings with supervisors. For me, Twitter (now X) was an essential resource in shaping my online networks and engagement with academics activists and everyday netizens who were concerned about the same issues as me.

Sandover et al. (2018) argue that digital media platforms, particularly X, are increasingly central to the constitution of politicised spaces and offer opportunities to reach broader geographic audiences, delivering nuanced insights into public perspectives. To this end, I reflect on my engagement with other social media platforms that do not offer the same level of written critical engagement, which I would argue is because other mainstream social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram focus more on visual media with less of an emphasis on written discourse. As a student learning to read, write and communicate complex ideas effectively, I have found that the short sharp nature of posts on X to be conducive to learning effective communication. However, I also say this knowing full well that X (just as any online public forum) does come with its challenges in terms of being exposed to hate speech or distressing content in general. From my personal experience, I do not encounter these instances too often – this could be due to my algorithm and the fact that I only tend to engage with content and users that relate to my specific research topic and interests.

Regarding the institutional use of X, I am a student who has benefited from institutional accounts in terms of the opportunities to read about and engage with the promotion of other academics' achievements, as well as finding out about events, job postings or new research projects. Through my use of X, I have become aware of new ideas and scholars, providing me with nuanced and situated perspectives on issues I am

passionate about. Although ‘academic twitter’ can be toxic at times, for the most part, my experience has been a positive one in terms of feeling part of a wider intellectual community. This is what Sandover et al. (2018, p. 108) describe as form of “associated politics”, a politics through which people concerned with public issues can assemble, listen and contribute to controversies and create spaces for debate about the science underpinning particular topics, ideas and controversies. From my student perspective, I think there is immense utility in using these digital spaces to foster diverse communities and provide early career academics with opportunities to further enrich their learning and social networks.

5.2. Author 5

Since Elon’s takeover in 2022, X/Twitter has gone through massive changes within its administration and experientially for users. I use X/Twitter for three reasons – quick access to global news, learning about topical issues in my field, and participating in activism. However, arguably the biggest concerns about X/Twitter border on authenticity of news (Cochran, 2023; Conger, 2023), which was well-managed with the “blue tick” verification icon during the Jack’s Twitter era, prior to Elon’s ownership. Previously, people and organizations had to earn “verified” status by meeting certain criteria but in this Elon era, \$8/month does it for anyone.

X/Twitter is an indubitable public space with unmatched influence, and as such, there must be mechanisms to ensure the verity of news on X/Twitter. Kapidzic et al. (2022) argue that there are news media that use X/Twitter as their source of information, which further highlights the influence of X/Twitter. Conger’s (2023) article, “How Elon Musk Changed the Meaning of Twitter for Users”, sums up the magnitude of changes and concerns over credible news sources, especially in times of social crisis. Cochran (2023) also argues that we are witnessing the “death spiral” of X/Twitter as the platform made it difficult to get news from credible sources during the Israel-Gaza socio-political crisis.

I use the X/Twitter to lend my voice to humanitarian issues and the most remarkable activism I have participated in was the historic End-SARS campaign carried out in Nigeria. The campaign was against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force accused of human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings (Shola & Nnaemeka, 2021). It was a protest ignited, fanned, and sustained through X/Twitter as the campaign attracted the attention of the world, with protests in almost every country of the world in solidarity with Nigerian youths.

It is important that Schools maintain their presence on X/Twitter because in this internet age, there is hardly prominence without online presence. X/Twitter serves as a promotional tool for research discoveries and new knowledge to break barriers and transcend our immediate environment (Chan et al., 2022; Howoldt et al., 2023; Raamkumar et al., 2018). An individual could repost a publication and it would be seen by people in different countries, and there is a positive correlation between article citations and posts about such articles on X/Twitter (Klar et al., 2020; Ortega, 2017). Also, posting publications on X/Twitter could stir robust discussions and collaborations among researchers (Guenther et al., 2023; Narayan et al., 2013).

The School should strive to strengthen its communications and interactions with academics and the public on X/Twitter. Although Humanities and Social Sciences journals have not had substantial presences on X/Twitter (Raamkumar et al., 2018), Fang et al. (2022) argue that Humanities and Social Sciences tends to generate more engagement on X/Twitter than any other field. To achieve this, the School needs a social media strategy team that would create awareness and facilitate engagement on X/Twitter, including running some paid adverts to boost awareness and cover the monthly cost of verification.

Further, developing an ideal model of ownership and governance for X/Twitter or similar platform is tricky because it is the brainchild of social entrepreneurs, and a private enterprise. One important step in that direction would be to set up a governing board that includes

representatives of the government and public to regulate both owners and users. The big questions would be, “who should constitute the governing body and how would they manage conflict of interest?” For instance, when Jack was Twitter CEO, Donald Trump’s tweets were flagged, and the account suspended. When Elon took over, he restored Trump’s account alongside several others and there has since been waves of “freedom of speech” on X/Twitter.

5.3. Author 6

I came to Twitter for non-academic reasons. It was a public – even activist – square. Once there we discovered ‘academic twitter’. Twitter’s combination of a relatively mass social media audience with sizeable and specific ‘elite’ audiences, such as academics, journalists, companies and politicians, makes it especially valuable, the threat to Twitter more important, and retreat from the platform more consequential.

It was always problematic that such a platform was privately owned. Twitter already converted sociability, networks and unpaid labour into profit. It was already shaping access and attention through algorithms and privately enforced codes. Moreover, its central role in politics – both in mass movements and in Trump’s presidency – signal its power and the inevitability that its governance be contested.

Reflecting on Twitter’s evolution since Musk’s take over, I have thought as much on the model it replaced as what it has become. We did not lose democratic or egalitarian Twitter. We lost, I think, *liberal* Twitter. Its governance, managed by a private corporation, but according to broadly held (especially American) liberal norms, supported the model of academic Twitter, while also creating wider audiences and spaces for research ‘impact’.

The loss of liberal forms of, and limits to, toleration is real. As in many other spaces where authoritarian populism challenges the liberal order, the consequences for minorities are usually more dramatic and harmful than for the ‘liberal elites’ nominally targeted by the attacks. But many spaces of power are hostile for those on the margins, while remaining important spaces of contestation.

For many, academic Twitter is already reverting to normal. Many who became dormant on X/Twitter immediately after Musk’s take over, including me, have re-emerged. Twitter remains an important site for dissemination of ideas, publications and events. No other platform (yet) has the critical mass to reproduce even the ‘academic’ space of Twitter, let alone its intersecting elite and mass audiences.

Of course, this is truer for personal than institutional accounts. But the two overlap. Institutional accounts, after all, reflect similar motivations. They seek to take advantage of the network effects of academic Twitter, often in less individualised ways. And like company accounts and individual academics, once active on Twitter, they become subject to forms of contestation. Both dynamics suggest, I think, reasons to continue.

First, the competitive dynamics of the contemporary academy, combined with its nebulous desire for ‘impact’ will likely see academic Twitter continue as a privileged space. Twitter remains a component of prominent academic metrics, like Altmetrics. Universities effectively reward staff for engaging. Shouldn’t institutional accounts provide a platform for newer and less prominent colleagues? If institutions turn away, do they have obligations to challenge those internal rewards or to organise alternative spaces?

Second, Twitter remains a space of accountability, even as it becomes more toxic and hostile. It was seeing how those with less power used Twitter that led me back. A friend and anti-poverty activist used Twitter to fight back against mainstream media attacks. And then Gaza. Twitter became a frontline in a media war when so many other spaces locked out voices critical of Israeli actions, and a space to hold academia – especially social science – to account.

Presence and silence are not only questions for individual academics. As the Gaza conflict reveals, universities are key battlegrounds. No doubt that is a good reason for those running institutional accounts to

leave. But leaving also avoids accountability. Unlike university wide accounts, departmental and school accounts usually remain under the control of colleagues, rather than managers or communications teams. Yes they are promotional, but they are also collegiate.

For now, I doubt our account would say anything on such controversial issues. But if it remained, that silence might be challenged. It might force debate. Leaving forecloses such painful, but also democratic, possibilities. What is Social Science, when should Social Scientists speak? And where do those in the societies we study speak back?

*** The next passage depicts the reality of violence and trauma being experienced by Palestinians at the time of writing. It may be confronting and disturbing or trigger traumatic memories.**

5.4. Author 2

The corpse of 7-year-old Palestinian girl Sidra Hassoun dangles from a wall, her body sliced almost in half. Three men try to pull out the severed top half of her body, caught in the debris of a residential building targeted by Israeli airstrikes. A piece of concrete loosens, and Sidra's detached legs fall out (PressTV, 2024). A video shows footage of a Palestinian surgeon performing an amputation on his son's leg without anesthetic (Newsflare, 2023). For the past 262 days (at the time of writing), gruesome images, videos, and soundscapes of Israel's genocidal war on the people of Gaza have filled our newsfeeds and screens. At the time of writing, 37,500 Palestinians have been killed, over 13,000 of them children. The genocide, livestreamed to the world in real-time, has provoked a global awakening to the violence of Israel's settler colonial apartheid regime.

And yet, across Australia, media outlets, schools, employers, organizations, the public service have introduced repressive policies and directives imposing bans and limits on discussions of 'the conflict', such as an all-staff email sent to Victoria Legal Aid employees banning discussion because of 'different views', 'distress to employees' and 'inclusivity and respect.' (Nilsson & Shukur, 2024). NSW Education Minister Prue Car, criticising teachers donning keffiyehs in classrooms, reiterated the NSW Education Department's threat of disciplinary action if codes of conduct are breached (SkyNews, 2023). Journalists have been sacked or censored for voicing support with Palestinians on their public social media accounts (Muller, 2023; NDTV News Desk, 2024). Opportunities to comment in mainstream media are foreclosed by pro-Israel story framings or shut down by the anti-Palestinian racist gatekeeping of producers and editors. Mainstream media consistently elides historical context, delimiting discursive space for Palestinians to contribute to public discourse deploying their own analytics and frameworks. Artist performances have been cancelled; contracts terminated (Beazley, 2024; Brancatisano, 2023; Lim, 2024; O'Brien, 2024).

Orchestrated complaints campaigns by Zionists have sharply reconfigured relations between Palestinian academics and their university employers, such that Palestinian and pro-Palestine academics who are active on social media are approached through the lens of risk management and mitigation, not academic freedom, for speaking up for the human rights of the Palestinian people. This, at a time Israel has destroyed every university in Gaza, killed academics and students, and relentlessly targeted academics and students in Palestine, Israel, and the diaspora.

At this juncture in Palestine's rising global digital revolution, social media platforms serve as alternative 'public spheres' to enhance the "counter-power" of Indigenous politics" (Castells 2013 in Carlson & Frazer, 2021, p169). Indeed, content shared on social media by Palestinians in Gaza, or by Israeli soldiers and politicians, has been used as evidence at the International Court of Justice as part of South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide. Since 7 October we have seen how interventions on X have offered Palestinians and pro-Palestine advocates a space to mobilise, expose racism, garner support for open letters and campaigns and directly call out politicians and lobby groups. When the spaces for speaking, writing and advocating continue to shrink, it

becomes even more important for academics to intervene, at the very least in solidarity, amplifying Palestinian voices and sharing content that contributes to shifting political discourses and analytics.

Social media, as a "settler colonial space" (Carlson & Frazer, 2021, p184), is a critical site for intellectual labour and academics in the social sciences have an important role to play in leveraging X's affordances as a site for knowledge production and disruption. As a genocide unfolds, avoidance by academics from one of the most important public spheres for disrupting settler colonial violence is tantamount to a withdrawal of solidarity from the colonised subjects of racism and genocide. Palestinian academics participate on X even though participation within those spaces is circumscribed by white supremacy, shadow-banning and deliberate campaigns of trolling and mass reporting that precede the current genocide in Gaza (Fowler, 2022; Hatuqa, 2023; Kolody, 2023; Luu, 2023; Taha, 2020). I was recently alerted to my X profile being shared in an online doxing group. I reported an account and tweet that gleefully shared a photograph of a bomb in Gaza with my name written on it (and the names of other pro-Palestine voices). The tweet remains online, indicating that X reviewed my report but found no rule violation. Such online racism is, as Carlson and Frazer (2021: 26) write in their book *Indigenous Digital Life*, "a direct extension of the settler colonial project, which aims towards the silencing, erasure and disappearance of Indigenous peoples." And yet, it is on X where we Palestinians and our allies can, whilst simultaneously navigating algorithms, trolls, and repressive technologies, circumvent gatekeepers to disrupt Zionist narrative hegemony, challenge anti-Palestinian racism, and fight for our freedom.

5.5. Author 7

In Cory Doctorow's account, the profit imperative makes 'enshitification' the inevitable fate of profit-seeking platform companies "HERE IS HOW platforms die: First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die." (Doctorow, 2023). Elon Musk's resemblance to a marvel villain – menacing vulnerable communities (e.g. declaring the word 'cisgendered' a slur whose use can lead to account suspension, Hetzner, 2023) and trampling the public good (e.g. governance changes that increased hate speech on the platform, Hickey et al., 2023) – adds a twist to Doctorow's formula. A structural problem inherent to monopolistic capitalism now appears to us through the prism of a robber-baron's personality.

Our question – of how public educational institutions should engage with X – seemed simpler in Twitter's "good to users" phase. When respecting users and the growth imperative aligned, network effects turned Twitter into an invaluable academic tool. We gifted Twitter our intellectual labor and attention at a time when, in addition to academic networking, it was also sometimes a site of truth-telling and political organising. The results included Twitter's \$44 billion sale and the hosting of its user-network to Musk's whim.

The subsequent cycle of appropriation and enshitification was enabled by collective *inattention* to the implications of platform ownership. Ironically, inattention is also a deliberate product of platform companies' business models (Hari, 2023). Critics argue that under platform capitalism "subjectivity itself" becomes the "territory of reproduction of capitalist power relations" (Bueno, 2016).

How to respond? One option is complete withdrawal from the attentional economy (Odell, 2020). However, individual behaviour change rarely resolves structural problems. Further, withdrawal risks surrendering public discourse to reactionary forces and many users have compelling reasons to remain on X while its legacy network persists.

Public institutions like university departments have different motivations and responsibilities. Departmental accounts' public character means they rarely hold the political commitments that might compel individual engagement on X. Instead, they primarily promote scholarly

activities, for which alternative marketing sites exist. Public institutions therefore have the latitude to consider how their presence legitimates platforms and to allocate this resource with an eye to social benefit.

Are there superior alternatives to X? One candidate, Bluesky, responds to Mike Masnick's (2019) argument for 'protocols not platforms'. Masnick proposes an internet built around open protocols; e.g. much as rival phone companies allow customers to call each other, in this model each social media company provides an interface through which users engage across a common social media protocol. If users could change providers and select their own content algorithms and moderation policies, competitive pressures would promote business models that were better aligned with public interest. Mastodon, and other networks that make up the 'fediverse' follow a similar logic.

Masnick's proposal is far from radical. Moving from platforms to protocols is akin to adopting anti-trust law. As a profit-seeking 'Public Benefit Limited Liability Corporation', Bluesky still pursues capital accumulation. Its only advantage is that its open protocol empowers users to shift to another provider and so might inoculate against the extremes of enshittification.

Arguably, only socialised provision of digital infrastructures optimised for human need, not profit, might fully address capitalism's encroachment on human subjectivity. Nevertheless, imperfect as the alternatives may be, there's a strong case for institutions to leave X.

5.6. Author 1

When Twitter's blue bird icon was changed to a white X on a distressed black background, I knew I had to delete the app from my phone. I had been feeling a high degree of discomfort since Elon purchased the platform and the change from a cheery bird to a pirate-like X was my symbolic and material prompt to get off X/Twitter. Whether an institutional account should persist in this unsafe space is a question that needs to be informed by structural realities, ethical considerations, and whether continued usage of the platform builds or detracts from our work as an academic group.

Since Twitter has become X, the uneven experiences of this social media space have intensified. The remaking of this digital space to achieve Elon's ambitions has included removing safety features, reintroducing once banned accounts, and allowing harmful behaviours. The overarching ambition that Elon held for the platform when purchasing it was to somehow increase freedom of speech. He has shifted his position on this a few times and at one point claimed to support 'freedom of speech, not freedom of reach' (Musk, 2022), a move that speaks to a propensity to support shadowbanning.

One egregious change Elon instigated was reinstating 60,000 accounts of people who had previously been banned for breaching Twitter's then rules (Hutchinson, 2022). People who had been deemed to actively propagate harm were allowed to once again reclaim digital turf. Compounding this reinstatement and its potential to generate harm, observers and users of X/Twitter have noted how the guard rails have been removed from the platform and that nearly anything can now happen in this paradoxical affective space. Further, Elon fired half of the platform's employees shortly after buying Twitter, including executives in privacy, data security and compliance (Milmo, 2023), thereby changing the structure of the platform and reducing safety features.

Notably, there are groups of people that are deciding to leave X/Twitter in higher numbers than others. For example, data on male and female X/Twitter users shows a gendered shift: in 2022, 56.4 % of Twitter users were male, 43.6 % female. In 2023, that figure had jumped to 62.9 % male, 37.1 % female (Statista, 2023 – unfortunately (re)producing gender binary data rather than including diverse identities). No other social media sites are experiencing this shift.

The human aspects of what happens when a platform is co-opted into a tech bro's ambitions inform why I can no longer actively participate in X/Twitter. Technofeminist Wajcman (2004:77) wrote that 'an emancipatory politics of technology requires more than hardware and software;

it needs wetware—bodies, fluids, human agency'. Following this, what space is there for diverse 'wetware' when the abandoning of protections (such as they were) and a deepened reduction in respectful engagement starts pushing people off and out of these spaces?

An argument that is sometimes offered for why we should stay in, and on, X/Twitter is that no social media offers the same affordances as X/Twitter. But I find this a disingenuous stance – if we follow this line of argument through, it is a sign of weakness or inadequacy if you choose to not support Elon's vision, and risk harm therein. Just because there isn't currently a viable alternative for building a new social media presence, doesn't mean we should necessarily linger in one that hurts. For an institutional account such as ours to persist in X/Twitter, a blind eye must be turned to the unethical practices that now dominate it.

6. Conclusion: Ways forward?

Social media platforms like X have become integral to academic communication and public engagement. These digital spaces are shaped by both intangible elements—such as structures of feeling, meaning-making, and storytelling—and by formal structures of corporate governance. Yet, it is recent changes in X's formal governance that have created a dilemma for institutional accounts, raising serious questions about safety and ethics.

Should we stay or should we go? The individual views shared above are grounded in each of our diverse personal and academic positions vis à vis X/Twitter. However, when we listen carefully to each other, we find broad agreement concerning X's current dynamics and a departmental account':

The harms caused by X emerged as a surprisingly unified theme in our reflections. We agree that X is becoming increasingly harmful, less reliable as an information source, and that its corporate interests are increasingly misaligned with public interest. However, we acknowledge that the platform has always been privately owned and, as Rohlinger et al. (2023: 13) note, "Twitter was not a paragon of quality discourse in the past and is unlikely to become so in the future." While we believe that the labour invested in maintaining X accounts should not benefit or reward the new owner's actions, we recognize that most forms of academic publishing commodify our labour for corporate profit with little return (Larivière et al., 2015). Although we would prefer to migrate to a better option, currently no alternative can match the scale and impact of X, even if Bluesky is now the leading site for academic discussion (Zheng et al., 2025).

We also agree that while all major social media platforms are woefully underperforming in terms of providing safe spaces for women, racialised groups, and LGBTQIA+ people, X/Twitter has been the most egregious on this front. In the latest Social Media Safety Index report (GLAAD, 2024), X/Twitter has again been rated as doing the least to address the 'epidemic of anti-LGBTQ hate, harassment, and disinformation across the major social media platforms' (GLAAD, 2024: 4). X is not alone among social media in being a space of digital colonialism and extraction. The corporate interests that run these platforms exercise enormous social and political power, to the extent some claim they administer a new political economic order of 'techno feudalism' (Varoufakis, 2024). Yet, here too, on these dimensions, concerns for X/Twitter stands out.

Finally, we agree that X still plays a role in public debate, information sharing, networking, job searching, and, for better or worse, the calculative metrics of neoliberal universities, all of which are of increasing importance to academics, and potentially more so for junior colleagues intent on building academic careers. However, its most important public role has been on display since Israel's invasion of Gaza where the platform has been essential for campaigning, activism and conveying the horrors of war. To be sure, Twitter's role in public debate has always been paradoxical – Twitter sold user data to assist surveillance of activists and, under its new owners, has been increasingly amenable to censorship requests from authoritarian governments

(Biddle, 2024; Sánchez-Vallejo & Musk, 2025). However, there can be no doubt the platform sometimes acts as a conduit for less powerful voices to find broader public audiences despite the harassment, racism, trolling and disinformation such voices must navigate on the way (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; McLean, 2020).

While we share considerable common ground in identifying these problems, we differ on how to respond. At least two unresolved questions remain. First, can we achieve the benefits of an institutional account for staff, students and the School, through a different easily accessible platform where users are less likely to experience hate speech or harm, and where the institution is not providing labour and resources to support a business model and algorithm seemingly designed to promote reactionary political forces? There are less compromised platforms that could provide some of the community building and information exchange that @socsci_mq originally sought on Twitter. However, these alternatives are less used, networked and accessible than 'academic twitter'. Further, returning to Gong and Lane's (2019) research on institutional academic Twitter accounts, if we do choose to cultivate presences in alternative platforms, we could consider hiring or designating a social media coordinator who works across a range of platforms. How do we balance commitments to support these alternative platforms and contribute to building an online space more aligned to shared values, against efforts to resist the enshittification of X?

Second, what role do institutional accounts have beyond the information-sharing and community-building functions described above. If one of the main reasons to stay on X is that it is an important public square, what role should collective institutional accounts play in speaking up and speaking out? Until now @socsci_mq has not played an activist role, limiting any work in this space to announcing seminars or events or publications of colleagues. Unsurprisingly, many of these events and publications do advocate for change, but that was never the focus of our institutional account. Should institutional accounts be more activist, or at least more normative? If so, this raises questions about the types and scale of issues that should be engaged in; how collective decisions should be made about the form and content of posts; the values and principles that inform our online agendas; and the risks of misrepresenting diverse colleagues and students in the School. And how should we manage the very real institutional and personal risks that come with speaking out?

What does all this mean for our own account? We note that Twitter has been used by academics for multiple purposes since its inception (Neumeier, 2024); confusion and differences in views regarding possible ways forward in this paradoxical digital space are possibly inevitable and unsurprising. Nevertheless, the lack of consensus likely means maintaining the status quo – our account remaining, but silent – while acknowledging, and even supporting, our colleagues' decisions to engage. To revisit, briefly, Papacharissi's (2016) contestation of social media as a public sphere, we share her view that social media increasingly works as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary, but add the qualification that they are not always experienced as such. In sum, we may not have arrived at answers, but we feel we are closer to understanding the perspectives and stakes we feel and see. And with that understanding, perhaps we are closer to asking the right questions.

7. Epilogue

We received helpful reviews of our paper in May 2025. Already so much had changed. We have endeavoured to edit the paper to reflect the collective process we began and the moment of time it captures. Here, we briefly reflect on what happened between submission in August 2024 and resubmission in May 2025.

The most dramatic global change came with the US presidential election. Elon Musk and X/Twitter played a central role in Trump's election and first 100 days in office. As the actions of the US Government came to mimic the troll-like behaviour enabled on X, the concerns we

sought to navigate intensified. A flood of X users, especially in North America, left the platform, paralleled by significant increases in other platforms such as Blue Sky and LinkedIn. These trans-Pacific contortions redirected local engagement, reinforcing the difficulty in anyone, especially those outside the geopolitical core, unilaterally reshaping digital communities. The speed and continued evolution of these changes, we think, reinforces our search for principles rather than platforms. The world changed in late 2024, and we know it will change again.

As an ad hoc collective, the world has also changed for us. Reflections and responses to the issues raised in this paper vary over time, partly due to shifting positionality of the authors that are a part of this collective. For example, Author 3's initial reflections as a student have evolved following their transition from student to a precariously employed, full-time academic staff member at another higher education institution. This shift has complicated their relationship with online representation and engagement, as the stakes of visibility, professional identity, and institutional critique, have become more fraught in the context of academic precarity. Also, Trump's rise had local echoes, especially in the lead up to Australia's federal election. One of us was subject to an unprecedented decision to suspend a government grant following sustained, X-like attacks from the Murdoch press. And our collective efforts for voice and identity were themselves remade by (yet another) restructure that separates our group across Schools and makes defunct our X/Twitter handle. These events reinforce how central digital platforms are in global democratic and justice struggles, and, simultaneously, how challenging they are to navigate.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jessica McLean: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Randa Abdel-Fattah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Milena Bojovic:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Andrew McGregor:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Success Shaibu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ben Spies-Butcher:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jonathan Symons:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

While this was an unfunded project, the authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: the author team reports that indirect financial support was provided by Macquarie University. The author team reports a relationship with Macquarie University that includes: employment.

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