



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Who killed democracy on social media? It wasn't Elon Musk



How many of the 17.5 million people who voted on whether Elon Musk should remain Twitter CEO really thought he would quit if the majority said so? Millions were convinced of that, because the rules of democracy dictate the decision of the majority and they respect democracy. But that did not happen. Musk lost in a poll he initiated, as 57.5% of Twitter's 17.5 million users said he should step down as CEO. This instant vote involved a population the size of the Netherlands, or the state of New York, and that's a respectable vox populi.

However, if we were to translate the vote on Musk's job into the language of real democracy, it would mean that the turnout was only about 6%. Considerably less than in developed democracies, such as the Netherlands and the state of New York, when voting for representatives in the parliament, for example. Musk could have said that, despite the vote, he would not step down as CEO because a small number of users, who do not represent the majority opinion on Twitter, had asked for it. He could have said that he had doubts about the credibility of the vote, as it was possible that user cartels or fake accounts conspired against him.

However, he chose to end the simulation of democracy and told voters that he would step down "as soon as he finds someone foolish enough to take the job." That was the answer of the company's owner, and not the fighter for democracy like millions of Twitter users thought. They also thought they had found true democracy on their favourite social media, which they could not find in real life. Elon Musk may have wanted to have fun, or once again win global publicity (which he succeeded in again), but he did not play with democracy, and definitely did not try to replace it. And that seems to be what his Twitter users expected.

### The purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk was a real wake-up call for democracy seekers on social media

Expectations from social media about their

ability to substitute democracy, if (in their opinion) there is not enough of democracy in real life, are a big problem for users. The purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk for 44 billion dollars was a real wake-up call for democracy seekers on social media. It was as if only then did they realise that the platforms on which they write their opinions are not voluntary and free debate clubs, but businesses that have owners and are worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

The alarm, however, did not ring for years while all social media, including Twitter, practically narrowed the field of view of their users, by "continuing to build easy-to-use and powerful tools to give users the most personalised experience", which is actually directing users to desirable information. In an earlier study, Professor Cass Sunstein from Harvard University concluded that democracy requires something completely different, and that citizens should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance. "Serendipity is a good thing. Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself".

### Twitter is the voice of the self-anointed

Twitter is not a good example of democracy, even if we leave aside all the restrictions, including those introduced by its new owner. Almost all the content of all messages - as much as 97% - comes from only one quarter of users - these are the most active ones (Pew Research Centre). In the USA, where Twitter is the most popular, the inequality is even more pronounced - some 92% of messages come from only 10% of users (Social Shepherd). "People like to frame Twitter as a tool of democracy. You can make that case, but in practice, it's a very elitist institution.

Twitter is the voice of the self-anointed", concludes Jack Shafer, Politico's media expert. If many "influential" Twitter users were driven off the network by the transfer of the platform into the hands of Elon Musk, it did not happen because of the abolition of democracy on the

platform. Even before Elon Musk, it was a private medium that had its owners. It was not an unlimited natural resource.

Also, it had restrictions aimed at eliminating hate speech, racism, fake news and any other communication that goes beyond the limits of democracy. All social media, whether owned by Elon Musk or someone else, have a built-in virus of undemocratic behaviour for which there is no ideal solution yet. But even more significantly, they have embedded unrealistic expectations of hundreds of millions of users hoping to find an oasis of freedom of public speech on those media.

**Social media are no longer ordinary platforms, which do not have to bear responsibility for the content they publish**

“Public education, changes in algorithms, the development of a more journalistic culture within the management of these platforms, government pressures on “bad” actors abroad, and other non-legal solutions all need to be explored”, concluded professors Lee C. Bollinger and Geoffrey R. Stone, editors of the recently published collection *Social Media, Freedom of Speech and the Future of our Democracy*.

By occupying the digital sphere, social media are no longer "ordinary" platforms, which do not have to bear responsibility for the content they publish. For a long time, they had the protection of the famous Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, but over time they have "grown" into real media, because they have had the ability to influence the content on their platforms and use that ability.

They experienced that evolution and are still going through it under pressure, although it does not follow the same pace of evolution as their users' expectations that they will easily move from the harsh real world to full democracy just by logging into Twitter, Facebook or any other SM.

**The effects of social media will be radically different, and the harms done in earlier decades may be irreversible**

“Even if social media really did begin to undermine democracy (and institutional trust and teen mental health) in the early 2010s, we should not expect social science to “settle” the matter until the 2030s. By then, the effects of social media will be radically different, and the harms done in earlier decades may be irreversible”, wrote Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business, in *The Atlantic*.

A new survey by the Pew Research Centre supports these dark forebodings. Particularly in the USA, where 64% of people believe that social media has had a bad impact on democracy. In addition, as many as 84% of respondents in 19 countries believe that access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumours.

Even if Elon Musk finds someone "foolish enough to take his job", Twitter and other social media will not eliminate their dark side. It is not related to anyone personally, but to the fundamental nature of social media, and above all to the exaggerated democratic expectations of millions of its users.