

Can Elon Musk Save Twitter?

Mere days after my column explaining why Elon Musk shouldn't buy Twitter, Elon Musk bought Twitter — sort of. His offer's been accepted, but there's likely a good deal of red tape to get over before he hands over the cash and the current board hands over the keys. Given his continually adversarial relationship with the US Securities and Exchange Commission, it may take a little while.

That guy, he never listens to me. But he seems to have done pretty well for himself anyway. Not everyone can swing a \$44 billion deal on a hot property. Or build an electric car that accelerates from zero to 60 miles per hour in 3.3 seconds. Or send people to space and bring them back, then re-use the rockets.

Can he save Twitter? Well, he seems like a guy who gets things done. I wouldn't bet against him.

And, make no mistake, Twitter's in desperate need of saving. It's been declining for years, shedding real users and picking up annoying spam bots under management that seems less concerned with operating a high-engagement platform for all comers than with carrying water for the American political establishment and scolding and ostracizing wrong-thinkers.

Many Twitter users disagree. They've become accustomed to living in a walled garden, protected from viewpoints that make them uncomfortable. And the possibility that new ownership might tell them to grow up, stop whining, and learn to use the "block" button enrages them.

Only a few months ago, those users and I were in general agreement:

It's Twitter's platform. Twitter gets to set the rules for using that platform. If you don't like Twitter's rules, find or start a platform with rules you like better. Problem solved.

Now those rules may change, because the platform's ownership is changing. But my position remains the same, because that position wasn't based on happening to like the rules. It was based on respect for the property rights of the platform's owners.

Now that the ownership is changing, which may portend the rules changing, some who agreed with me when they liked the rules are hanging out on (virtual) street corners in sackcloth and ashes, waving THE END IS NEAR signs, and even urging the SEC to nix the deal so they can return to their version of Eden, undisturbed by serpents peddling heterodoxy.

Apparently “it’s a private company and can set whatever rules it wants” was a position of convenience, not principle. Go figure.

Musk has a tough row to hoe. Changing an entrenched corporate culture and bringing an aging platform up to date to deal with its infestation of spammers and scammers won’t be easy. I still think he’d have been smarter to start from scratch. But I wish him luck.

If he can transform Twitter back into a bona fide public square, he’ll be due the thanks of a grateful user base. And he’ll probably get some of that thanks, mixed in with complaints from those who pine for the return of their former idea-proof safe space.