

Content Analysis of Conspiracies on Twitter Post Musk Acquisition

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Background

After Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, there were many changes to the platform's policies and approaches to content moderation. Additionally, the platform informally shifted to be more tolerant of popular US-centric right-wing content.

- Hate speech from accounts that had previously posted harmful or offensive content had increased⁵
- Misinformation about topics that could impact a user's health, such as the COVID-19 vaccine, had increased³
- The number of automated accounts that spread misinformation or artificially boosted post engagement had increased⁵
- The algorithm had shifted to prefer right-wing content, unrelated to accounts that had purchased Twitter Blue¹

Conspiracy theories are of special interest because they can be even more dangerous than standalone pieces of misinformation. Despite these decreases in content quality on the platform, open hiring for Trust and Safety positions has not increased. In fact, since October 2022, over two-thirds of staff were laid off to cut costs⁶.

Research Questions

- To what extent have reinstated accounts become active?
- What are the topics and qualities of information that reinstated accounts interact with?

Hypotheses

- We expect that some users will have created new accounts or migrated to new social media platforms after reinstatement
- These accounts were previously suspended, so we expect to see the main reasons for suspension: offensive or harmful content

Methods

On March 10th, 2023, a list of 52,603 reinstated Twitter accounts was published on GitHub by an independent researcher². Account status was tracked by 5,000 automated seed accounts: a follow decreasing would indicate an account's suspension, while a follow increasing would indicate a reinstatement.

This study randomly sampled 10% of all reinstated accounts for demographic analysis. For content analysis, we sampled 3,600 of the top overall reposted posts, collected through Twitter's API. Following Grounded Theory⁴, we generated original codes based on a random sample of 600 posts, and then used our final coding scheme to categorize the remaining 3,000 posts.

Preliminary Results

- 2,710 of the 5,260 reinstated accounts were active
- 36% of posts contained conspiracies
- 12.5% of posts included video interviews, 8.5% linked to news articles, and 0.5% linked to research papers
- Rhetoric was used for plausible deniability of offensive behavior, 6.5% of posts were racist, and 3% against LGBTQ individuals

Individual users not affiliated with mainstream or independent news did not produce original conspiracy theories. They merely agreed with right-wing news's claims and evidence presented without checking for accuracy or adding to the discussion. A theme arose within independent right-wing news accounts: solicited donations or promoted products were common, unlike mainstream right-wing news accounts.

Figures

Figure 1
Advertisements From DailyClout's Website



Note. These are embedded advertisements; ad blockers have no effect because they are built into the website.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Reinstated Twitter Accounts

	Mean	SD	Median
Follower Count	5913.13	47870.23	373.50
Post Count	26333.63	61434.73	7078.50
Like Count	11.05	333.58	0
Repost Count	952.09	5465.06	0

Note. Highly negatively skewed like and repost counts are normal for Twitter data.

Discussion

Our hypotheses were partially supported

- There was evidence for new account creation or platform migration since almost half of all accounts remained inactive
- News accounts generated the most posts, engaged in claim-making, and provided evidence for their claims
- Individual accounts did not make original claims, and did not provide evidence for claims they agreed with
- Replying or quoting posts increased engagement more than reposting content. Those are both common ways to correct misinformation, but they also boost its reach

Limitations

- Our sample is biased because we had to get account data second-hand, rather than directly from Twitter. This data used to be free for researchers, but in March it became paywalled
- We do not have access to the exact reason for account suspensions, and this would not be included in Twitter's data

Future Recommendations

Content moderation needs to be much stronger and account suspensions should be accompanied with IP bans. VPN bans however should not be implemented, as it would harm other users.

For future studies, looking into independent right-wing news accounts would be interesting. These accounts may not actually support the right-wing beliefs they promote, instead they may only be interested in profiting through exploiting users' paranoia. The tagline on The Wellness Company's website, "Vaccinated or not, taking your health seriously has never been more important.", is included to appeal to a broad an audience as possible, rather than the right-wing niche.

References

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