



Where Are They Now? A Content Analysis on the Twitter Accounts Reinstated by Elon Musk

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Abstract

This research project examined the aftermath of Elon Musk’s takeover of popular social media platform “X”, formerly known as Twitter. Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter aimed to reduce the app’s prior censoring of users which limited their free speech. Following his acquisition of the app, hate speech and conspiracy theories began to circulate incessantly through Twitter through means of reinstated accounts that were previously banned. In March 2023, over 5,000 of these previously banned Twitter accounts were randomly sampled and we gathered their most recent 100,000 tweets. Next, we utilized a combination of content analysis and Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic modeling to pinpoint common topics/themes and investigate them for content containing hate speech and conspiracy theories. The reinstated accounts displayed nodes of both sexual and racial discrimination while pushing a far-right extremist viewpoint.

Introduction

- In October of 2022, the acquisition of popular social media platform Twitter by Elon Musk prompted site-wide remodeling of the platform.
- With this, Musk emphasized the importance of freedom of speech, reinstating thousands of previously suspended accounts that were removed from Twitter due to hate speech and engaging in other behaviors not in line with the app's policies (Barrie, 2022).
- Reinstated accounts pose a grave threat to the integrity of Twitter and online discourse, for these users hold the ability to manipulate the website's atmosphere and push conspiracy theories and political agendas while also spreading mass quantities of misinformation (Hickey et al., 2023).
- Notably, previous research discovered marks of anti-semitism became widespread, with Twitter users denouncing the Holocaust and spreading anti-semitic propaganda (Jikeli et al., 2023).
- Moreover, since the Musk takeover, millions of users have deactivated their Twitter accounts.
- Existing research examines the potential rise in hate speech on the app, but no research investigates the political attitudes and information quality behind the reinstated accounts.

Research Questions

- To what extent have reinstated accounts become active?
- What topics are the reinstated users discussing in their posts?
- What are the kinds and qualities of information these accounts are sharing?

Methods

In this project, more than 2,500,000 tweets were gathered from over 5,000 previously banned Twitter accounts that were unsuspended by Elon Musk following his takeover.

- On March 10, 2023, a GitHub repository that identifies suspended and unsuspended accounts by utilizing the friend and follower lists of seed accounts (accounts used as the starting point for data collection) was found.
- Accounts are evaluated for unsuspension when they disappear from or appear on a seed accounts’ friend or follower list.
- The GitHub repository contained 52,603 IDs of accounts unsuspended by Musk on March 10th, 2023-- the project’s time of data collection.
- The lead researcher randomly sampled 10% (n = 5,260) of the unsuspended accounts for further analysis.
- With the sampled accounts, we collected their most recent 10,000 tweets through Twitter’s v2 API using the academictwitteR package for R with an Academic Developer’s License.
- A semi-grounded content analysis is currently underway on the top 5,000 tweets in retweet count from the re-instated accounts mentioned in the preliminary results.

Preliminary Results

- The user IDs of 5,260 accounts that were not suspended have been gathered.
- Out of these unsuspended accounts, only 2,710 (51.5%) engaged in posting or sharing activities after their suspension was lifted.
- A sum of 2,428,413 tweets was amassed from these 2,710 unsuspended accounts.

Statistics of unsuspended users:

Stat	median	mean	stan_dev
<u>user_followers_coun</u>			
<u>t</u>	373.5	5913.132	47870.23
<u>user_tweet_count</u>	7078.5	26333.63	61434.73
<u>user_verified</u>	0	0.001199	0.034627

- The distribution of follower count and tweet count exhibits a significant negative skew, a typical trait observed in Twitter datasets. This table demonstrates that approximately 0.12% of the unsuspended users sampled were verified as of March 2023, following Musk's introduction of purchasable verification.

Stat	median	mean	stan_dev
<u>like_count</u>	0	11.04896	333.5807
<u>quote_count</u>	0	0.14454	6.983235
<u>retweet_count</u>	0	952.088	5465.064

- Subsequently, we selected the latest 10,000 posts from each of the 5,260 unsuspended accounts, resulting in a count of 2,428,413 tweets, retweets, quote tweets, and replies.

Discussion

- After being reinstated, a significant portion of the accounts remained inactive, surpassing our initial expectations. Interaction primarily revolved around US-centric right-wing content.
- Prominent accounts focused on advocating for truth exposure and fundraising, relying heavily on support from smaller users.
- Furthermore, the algorithm exhibited a bias towards right-wing content, with engagement metrics indicating that responding or quoting posts amplified reach more effectively than simply reposting content. While these actions are commonly used to combat misinformation, they inadvertently contribute to its spread.

References

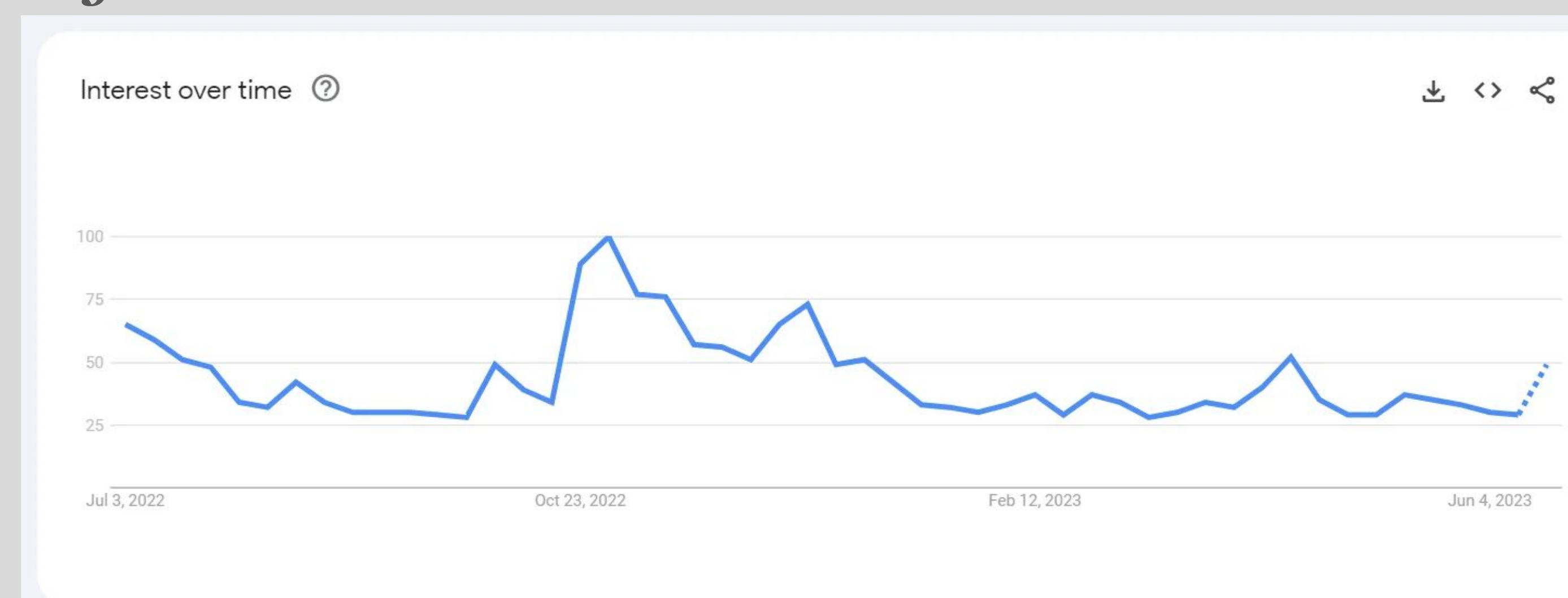
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Figure 1. Interest in Twitter overtime.



There was a significant spike in Twitter usage and interest in October of 2022, when Musk acquired the platform