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**THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA:  
TRUMP, COVID-19, THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE,  
AND ELON MUSK**

Social media have arisen to become the world's go-to mode of communication in an astonishing fifteen years. In the past few years, social media themselves have been shaken by Donald Trump's use of Twitter, and by deceptive reporting about many crucial aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. And now, in just the past few months, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has put social media to the test, with an informational war being fought alongside the physical war, and billionaire Elon Musk's attempt to buy Twitter perhaps ending any attempt to limit deceptive posts that jeopardize human lives. This essay examines what is happening.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Twitter, social media, COVID-19, Russian invasion of Ukraine, media evolution

The pace of the evolution of media has accelerated exponentially. Thousands of years elapsed between the invention of the phonetic alphabet in the Ancient World and Gutenberg's invention of the press with interchangeable type in Europe in the mid-1400s. Hundreds of years then passed between that and the Age of Invention in the 1800s, which brought us the telegraph, photography, the telephone, the phonograph, and motion pictures. And it was just a matter of decades before radio, television, and personal computers appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Levinson, 1998).

All of that happened before the advent of social media, which began with blogging at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in the very first years of our 21<sup>st</sup> century, amplified with the iPhone (which first appeared in 2008) and all manner of portable devices which have enabled us to work and play on the Internet outside of and away from our offices and homes. As I argued in my *New New Media* (2009; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2012), the social media revolution enabled what were once only consumers of all media, including iTunes and Amazon, to become producers. I called these apps "new new media" to distinguish them

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from iTunes and Amazon, new media which at first operated like old media online, allowing their customers to consume but not produce content. By the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Amazon's Kindle had transformed that company, at least in part, into a "new new medium," by allowing and encouraging any reader to become an author (Levinson, 2014).

When I wrote *New New Media* in 2009, and revised it for a second edition in 2012, I saw social media as an undilutedly democratizing development, and cited the Arab Spring and its use of Twitter and Facebook as supporting evidence. I also cited Barack Obama's two successful campaigns for the Presidency of the United States, and their use of online media in his campaigns, as more evidence of social media as a new bulwark of democracy. Little did I expect that by 2016 the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President and his myriad Tweets would provide a destructive counterargument. (But see Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021, for research that nonetheless still supports a view of social media as a bulwark of democracy.)

Trump's election, and his four years as U.S. President, polluted the river of Twitter with a daily torrent of deceptions and blatant lies, and culminated with his being outrightly banned from Twitter (Twitter, 2021), after a Twitter review of his tweets concluded that he had knowingly stirred up the attack on the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021, an attempt to overturn his defeat by Joe Biden in the 2020 election deemed by many (including me) as an outright insurrection. Some people objected that this ban violated Trump's First Amendment rights as an American citizen. But since the First Amendment prohibits the U.S. government from interfering with communication, and Twitter was and is not part of any government, that objection did not apply. I reluctantly agreed with Twitter's banning of Trump, even though I do not like to see censorship in any arena (Levinson, 2021).

Meanwhile, media theorists, most especially Andrey Mir (2020), had begun to notice in Twitter and other social media a profound move away from the truth, long prized as sacred to traditional journalism. Mir observed that in social media instead of the truth of a statement or a report being what counted most, it was how often a statement or report was 'liked' and 'retweeted' (or shared on Facebook) which became the goal of posters.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem of disinformation and the damage it can engender. (By the way, I think it is important to distinguish between disinformation or a deliberate attempt to deceive, and misinformation, which is an honest mistake in reporting). Deliberately disseminating false information and conspiracy theories about highly effective vaccines and bogus cures that did not work, and about COVID-19 itself not being such a deadly threat, literally resulted in the loss of human lives (e.g., see Edelman & Sotomayor, 2020).

That was the state of affairs in the world and in social media when I agreed to guest edit this special issue of this journal and contribute an article about the future of social media, in 2021.

And then, two things happened: Russia invaded Ukraine, and Elon Musk announced his intention to buy Twitter. The stated nature of his ownership would be to make Twitter – or restore it to what he considers to be – a true "public square," by which he means, open to all opinions, and "legal" communications (Edelman, 2022). Would this permit disinformation (information that is deliberately deceptive) about COVID-19? Would it allow Trump and his disinforming and incendiary tweets to return to Twitter?

We will look at both issues – social media and the Russian attack on Ukraine, and Musk’s intention to buy Twitter – in the remainder of this essay.

## RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Wars have always put pressure on media, going back well before Twitter and social media. During the Second World War, American journalists voluntarily withheld reporting information that would endanger military activities of the allies. In the Falklands War, the United Kingdom forbade the BBC from reporting certain developments (Levinson, 1998).

The publication of the Pentagon Papers, which revealed that the American launch of the Vietnam War entailed deliberately provoking the North Vietnamese to fire on an American vessel going in and out of North Vietnamese waters, was opposed by the then American President, Richard Nixon, because the war was still going on. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that such squelching of the press was a violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, Edward Snowden left America under threat of arrest after he leaked information to Wikileaks, even though Daniel Ellsberg, who made the Pentagon Papers public, said Snowden was doing the same thing (MacAskill et al., 2015).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, has not resulted in anything like the above in America – no Americans have fled the United States under threat of arrest – but the Russian attack on Ukraine has had a chilling effect on Russian independent media and international social media in Russia (Ellingworth, 2020), as Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to squelch any dissent while the war is also being fought out as an informational war on social media. If you type #IStandwith on Twitter, the resulting choices will include #IStandWithUkraine (which I sign many of my posts with) and #IStandwithRussia. This battle of hashtags is made even more complex and vexing by the fact that people who post on Twitter may be bots and not people, or people hiding behind pseudonyms. (I only post under @PaulLev, which connects to my real name, Paul Levinson).

Anonymous and pseudonymous posting has been an issue since the earliest days of social media (Levinson, 2009, 2012). Its defenders argue that shielding one’s identity promotes free speech and the posting of honest opinions, since the shielded poster would be immune from criticism and worse actions by employers, friends, family members, political enemies, etc. On the other hand, opponents of such kinds of postings argue that they encourage all manner of disinformation and verbal attacks, precisely because that same shielding of the true identities of posters renders them largely immune from retribution for their misleading statements. Anonymous and pseudonymous accounts can easily be removed by the app for illegal and life-threatening posts, but it doesn’t take much work to reinstate them from a different IP (Internet Protocol) address under a different phony name. I have always preferred real names – I don’t like talking to unknown people with figurative bags over their heads, who could easily pretend to be someone they are not – but at the same time I harbor some sympathy for anonymous and pseudonymous posters. Nonetheless, should someone who posts lies about COVID-19 or presents an argument in favor of Russian aggression be afforded the protection of an anonymous or pseudonymous post? I would say not.

Whatever the identity of the poster, social media have the advantage of easily disseminating every kind of older medium, as texts, photographs, sound recordings, and videos are easily sent and received through social media. Back in the 1990s, before the advent of social media, I said that the Internet was “the medium of media,” because it accommodated and distributed all prior means of communication (Levinson, 1999). Photography changed the public’s perception of war from a grand and noble endeavor to a destructive and horrendous thing, with Matthew Brady’s photographs of the American Civil War back in the 1860s (Levinson, 1998). The Russian atrocities in Ukraine, including the killing of women and children, are engraved in photographs and videos now made available to everyone in the world nearly instantly on Twitter, Facebook, Tik-Tok, and other social media. Such social media are readily available in the West, while Russia does its best to deny its people access to them. But the history of totalitarian countries shielding their people from information is uneven and their attempts are never completely successful. In Nazi Germany during World War II, The White Rose distributed printed leaflets in Germany about Nazi atrocities (Levinson, 1998). In the final years of the Soviet Union, *samizdat* video brought more truth to the Russian people than they were able to see on their televisions (Levinson, 1992).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Ukrainian defense, was early on called “The First TikTok War” (Chayka, 2022), but that can best be understood by substituting “social media” for TikTok. All social media partake in the consumer becoming producer, the smartphone is available in everyone’s hands, and the ease with which a snapshot can be taken or a video made and disseminated is probably the most significant advance in the public’s access to and knowledge of the repulsive horrors of war since Brady’s photographs taken in the 1860s.

It should now be apparent that I am, as author of this article, by no means neutral regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I think the Russians have been murderous, indiscriminate aggressors, and their invasion of Ukraine is a darkly gleaming example of what American journalist Edward R. Murrow once said about the Holocaust, the Nazi mass murder of Jews, during the Second World War: there are not two sides to every story; some stories have only one side. Murrow’s best-known quote on that is “I simply cannot accept that there are, on every story, two equal and logical sides to an argument”, and it comes up in George Clooney’s 2005 biopic *Good Night, and Good Luck*, in which Clooney has Murrow saying just that about Murrow’s reporting on Senator Joe McCarthy and his deceiving denunciation and persecution of anyone he deemed to be “red,” i.e., a Communist or Communist sympathizer in America. Political columnist Nancy LeTourneau noted in 2019: “Even though that particular dialogue was dramatized for the film, it captures the story of how Murrow broke from the pack of journalism as it was practiced back in 1953 when he saw something happening in this country that was disturbing. There were no ‘both sides’ to what Senator McCarthy was doing. It was simply wrong.” She concluded that we needed an Edward R. Murrow in the Trump era.

But Elon Musk, billionaire and apparently the wealthiest person in the world – who is revolutionizing automobiles with his Tesla, which runs completely on electrical power, and building Space X vehicles that go out into space, with the ultimate objective of going to Mars, two highly laudable initiatives, in my view – said, after making his Starlink international communication facilities available to Ukraine shortly after the Russian invasion, that he would not lock Russia out of the Starlink system, because he is “a free speech absolutist” (Malik, 2022). And on 25 April 2022, Musk’s purchase of Twitter was announced (Duffy, 2022) – as

of this writing, the purchase has yet to be approved by shareholders (Keenan, 2022) – along with his intention is to make it a truer vehicle of free expression, or in his view, open to all views and sides.

## ELON MUSK AND TWITTER

There is so much emphasis on what social media do – including by me, when I say that they turn all consumers into potential producers – that we tend to ignore the fundamental question of who owns them. But in the end, the owner of any social medium has far more power over that medium and what it does than do its millions of users and the texts, photographs, and videos they produce and disseminate. After all, an owner can choose to shut down a system, and not sell it to someone else, and that would stop that system cold. Or, an owner could change what a system does and how it does it.

Elon Musk is the richest person in the world, with a wealth estimated at \$219 billion (Dolan and Peterson-Withorn, 2022). Unfortunately, his medical knowledge has not been up to par. He promoted the use of Chloroquine, a remedy for malaria, as an effective medication for COVID-19, which it is not. He wrongly claimed that children were “essentially immune” to the virus, and the devastating pandemic would be over by April 2020. He made all of these statements on Twitter (Walsh, 2021). If Musk was in charge of Twitter, would he allow such statements, which jeopardize human lives, to be posted on the system?

Musk began buying numerous shares of Twitter, a publicly owned company, at the end of January 2022. By 4 April 2022, he had amassed nearly ten percent of all shares of the company. He announced a bid to buy 100% of Twitter on 13 April 2022. On 21 April 2022, Musk announced that he had received enough funding to buy enough shares to control Twitter (Weprin, 2022). So now Musk is apparently on his way to owning it, pending stock holder approval and a few other lesser potential obstacles (Keenan, 2022), and assuming he doesn't change his mind (Shed, 2022).

Throughout the history of media we have become accustomed to one or two people inventing a powerful new device, but not necessarily controlling it for years to come. Louis Daguerre's photographs were first unveiled in 1839; France presented the process as a gift “to the world”. Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone in 1876, his father-in-law started the Bell Telephone Company a year later, and the company's operations were taken over by Theodore Vail in 1879. Jack Dorsey is the person most credited with the creation of Twitter (in 2006); he resigned as Twitter's CEO (Chief Operating Officer) at the end of November 2021 (Conger and Hirsch, 2021).

Elon Musk, who had nothing to do with Twitter's creation, now stands to have far more power over its operations than any CEO of a publicly traded company. It may seem strange, especially to those parts of the world without the commitment to capitalism of the United States, that any amount of money, however large, can in and of itself give its possessor complete control of a company as crucial to human communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Twitter has been and continues to be.

Twitter's 330 million active users are far below Facebook's 2.9 billion or TikTok's 1 billion, but Twitter has played a uniquely important political role in the United States and

therefore the world, in part because it was Donald Trump's chosen means of expressing his views to the world, though Twitter was already taking on that role. FDR was a radio President, JFK through Ronald Reagan through Barack Obama were television Presidents, and Trump was the first Twitter President (Levinson, 2015–2021). Joe Biden has returned, to some extent, to television, but his use of Twitter is nonetheless more than any other prior President, other than Trump.

The whole world, our entire human species, increasingly relies upon social media, but in America and therefore the world, social media may be only as reliable as the largest amount of money that can be put up to buy them.

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