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Twitter: a necessary evil? Journalistic Responses to Elon Musk and the Denormalization of Social Media

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Abstract:

The normalization of social media (notably Twitter) into journalistic routines has been well documented in research, even as social media use sometimes remains a source of conflict with traditional journalistic values and norms. In 2022, after Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter, the normative implications of social media use came into sharp focus for journalists, as Musk ushered in a series of platform changes perceived as unfavorable for the journalistic profession. Focusing on the French media sector in six-month period after Musk's takeover, this study aims to explore what happens when journalistic digital tools are disrupted. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of French news articles, I show that Musk's actions as CEO prompted journalists to question the broader legitimacy of social media as a journalistic tool. However, rather than abandoning Twitter entirely, journalists employed strategic disconnection in order to reconcile their continued Twitter use with their normative discomfort. These findings not only provide empirical evidence on the effects of Musk's takeover, but also showcases how strategic disconnection can be used as a method of resistance to unwelcome influences in the media sector.

Introduction

#GoodbyeTwitter! In November 2022, after Elon Musk had taken over as CEO of Twitter (later renamed as X), user calls to abandon ship took many forms. This was particularly true for media professionals, whose steady position on the platform now stood on shakier ground. Commodifying “blue tick” verification features, removing headlines from links to news articles, labelling public service media as “state-affiliated”, and outright suspending several US journalist accounts¹ – many of Musk’s actions as CEO seemed to turn Twitter into less hospitable territory for journalists.

This led both media organizations and individual journalists to turn away from the platform. In April 2023, after being labelled as “state-affiliated”, media outlets including the US National Public Radio, Swedish Radio, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company officially left Twitter.² A non-representative survey of UK journalists from portfolio site MuckRack found that 50% of their respondents had considered leaving the platform since the takeover.³ Yet, a much-prophesized “mass exodus” from Twitter seemed slow to materialize. A Tow Center study from February 2023 found that out of 4000 US journalists, few deactivated their accounts, and activity levels only dropped by 3% on average – with a slightly lower drop for right-leaning media outlets and a slightly higher one for left-leaning ones (Gotfredsen, 2023).

This separation anxiety showed that turning away from the platform was no easy choice for journalists, nor one without normative implications. Musk’s Twitter forced a dilemma upon the media industry: should journalists keep using a platform that seemed to be turning against them? What did this mean for the future use of social media in journalistic practices? In this paper, I dig deeper into how journalists reflected upon their Twitter use in relation to their journalistic values in the six months directly following Musk’s takeover.

While the disruptive force of technology, including the proliferation of social media, has been widely studied (Parasie, 2022; Lewis and Molyneux 2018), I seek to interrogate this period as a potential watershed moment in the normalization of social media use in journalistic practice. The ways in which social media logic has been perceived as hostile to journalistic ideals and the strategies that journalists employ to reconcile or even transform their professional values in the face of such contradictions has been well documented (Dagoula, 2022; Christin and Petre, 2020; Mellado and Alfaro, 2020). However, most studies have so far focused on what leads journalists to embrace or resist an overall trend of increasing normalization of social media, chiefly Twitter, as a journalistic tool (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018; Lasorsa et al, 2012). In a mood of increasing tech pessimism and critical perspectives that question the legitimacy of Silicon Valley influence in the media (Pickard, 2023), we should not take the trajectory of this trend for granted. While social media has become the most important news source for global audiences, this traffic is driven by an increasingly fragmented platform landscape,

¹ Dang, S (2017) Elon Musk restores Twitter accounts of journalists but concerns persist. Reuters, 17 December 2022.

² Reuters (2023) Swedish Radio becomes first big European broadcaster to quit Twitter. Reuters, 18 April 2023.

³ Ponsford, D (2023) Twitter is facing an exodus from its most devoted followers: Journalists. Press Gazette, 17 April 2023.

where the previously dominant positions of Facebook and Twitter are in question (Newman, 2023). Did the media's reaction to Musk's takeover simply herald a move from one platform to another, or did it pose a more significant challenge to journalistic core values? Does the decentralization of Twitter as a journalistic tool point to a wider *denormalization* of social media in journalistic practice? Why or why not?

Exploring this angle, I also aim to contribute to a nascent body of work on journalistic disconnection on social media. As studied and articulated by Bossio and Holton (2021) and Bélair-Gagnon et al (2022), disconnection practices are not just about rejection of new technologies. Rather, specific and *strategic* forms of disconnection enable journalists to continue their work while reconciling their own priorities with pressures to be active on social media platforms. I add to this research by showing how journalists also engage in disconnection as a marker of their own values and method of resistance, not only to Musk's Twitter, but to the broader influence of tech giants.

To highlight how changes in ownership among US-based tech companies cause shockwaves globally, I chose to anchor my research in France. French journalists have reported similar levels of Twitter usage as other Western European democracies (Cision, 2018) as well as similar types of usage and ranges of attitudes toward the platform (Hernández-Fuentes and Monnier, 2022). However, at least in comparison to the US, French journalists do not necessarily experience the same pressures to remain active on social media (Christin, 2018), having historically enjoyed greater protection from market forces (Benson, 2013). A history of greater protection from market forces (Benson, 2013) still colors French newsroom dynamics even as technological changes impose convergence of journalistic practices globally (Parasie, 2022).. The French case may thus help our understanding of how the adoption or rejection of global technological tools play out in nation-specific contexts.

In the following sections, I first outline the existing literature on the relationship between social media and journalistic norms and how disconnection literature fits into this body of research. After a methodological overview, I outline my findings on 1) how French journalists perceived the legitimacy of Twitter as a journalistic tool, and 2) how they adopted strategic disconnection as a response. I find that Musk's takeover triggered a moment of normative reflection among journalists about the legitimacy of social media use in relation to their professional values. Building on previous works on strategic disconnection, I show how journalists reconciled the pragmatic benefits of Twitter with their normative objections to the platform. These findings contribute to existing literature on how journalists navigate conflicts between the changing logics of new technologies and their professional values, showing how Musk's takeover destabilized the normalization of Twitter (and of social media more generally) as a central journalistic tool.

Journalistic social media practices as shapers of professional norms

The introduction of new technology (from broadcast radio to social media) into journalistic practice has always provoked moments of tension and renegotiation with existing professional norms (Meltzer, 2010). While far from immutable, such norms serve to define journalism as an autonomous professional field with its distinct code of practice (Schudson, 2005). For example, Deuze (2005) lists the following values as ideal-typical cornerstones in the journalistic occupational ideology in the West:

- 1) Public service – journalists as “watchdogs”;
- 2) Objectivity – neutrality, “being fair”;
- 3) Autonomy – avoiding external influence;
- 4) Immediacy – timeliness, relevance;
- 5) Ethics – codified professional standards.

Depending on the time and context, social media has been perceived as a threat or an asset to such core values. The perception that social media favors mass appeal and viral logic over markers of “quality” journalism is a key point of tension (Bossio, 2018). For example, the instantaneity of social media platforms can create pressures for journalists to work more quickly, at the cost of time-intensive verification and investigation (Weaver et al, 2019). These contradictions exemplify long-standing tensions between the public service role of journalists and the commercial incentives of media industry owners – ultimately, social media use necessitates engagement (however reluctant) with the interests of private platform companies (Mellado and Hermida, 2022).

Due to its popularity in the media sector, Twitter has been at the heart of such tensions. In her 2022 book, Dagoula maps how Twitter’s integration into journalistic practice over the past decade has undergone three phases: disruption, adaption, and normalization. While the influence of Silicon Valley-based tech companies was at first perceived as an external force imposing a foreign (and highly commercial) logic into journalism, the media industry gradually integrated Twitter and other social media tools into their practices. That is not to say that the use of Twitter is now ubiquitous or universally seen as legitimate. A wide spectrum of attitudes toward social media, from skepticism to enthusiasm, can be identified among the journalistic profession (Mellardo and Alfaro, 2020).

Overall, however, Twitter undoubtedly offers many practical benefits to a journalist’s daily work. Journalists use Twitter for monitoring the news, promoting their work, and interacting with sources, audiences, and potential new employers (Dagoula, 2022). These functions not only enable journalists to perform traditional professional values (notably “immediacy” through constant real-time global connectivity), but also to expand upon them. For example, a greater level of subjectivity has been identified in journalists’ Twitter presence than in traditional performances of journalistic “objectivity” (Hayes et al, 2017). This is partially explained by a greater pressure to develop a “personal brand” to promote stores, which in the past was considered the outlet’s job (Tandoc and Vos 2016).

Shifting the burden of labor onto the individual journalist to increase visibility (and clicks on ads) for the media outlet, naturally falls within the interests of media owners, which partially explains the normalization of social media within newsrooms. This occurs even when the journalistic workforce does not experience such changes as positive (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2021). For example, journalists have reported feeling pressured to continue using Twitter even in the face of serious online harassment campaigns (Claesson, 2022).

Considering the negative reactions to Musk’s takeover that major media outlets expressed (notably through the walkout of public service outlets), it is possible that such pressures may change. Since the “narrative of normalization” of social media has so far been dominant within journalism research (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018, p 14), we lack knowledge on how journalists react when this normalization is disrupted. To explore this question, I draw on the interdisciplinary literature on disconnection.

Resistance through disconnection

Disconnection studies explore how and why individuals opt out of the connective affordances of digital technologies through a wide range of behaviors, by no means limited to avoiding social media altogether. Private messaging spaces, blocking or muting other users, passive “lurking” – individuals draw their own boundaries around their online experiences in many ways (Light, 2014). Motivations behind disconnection can be just as diverse, but an element of individual or collective resistance to how new media shape society is often present. This is by no means unique to social media. Syvertsen (2017) outlined how “media resistance” to print media, cinema, radio, television, and digital media has been a constant in the socio-political landscape starting from the 19th century. Today, disconnection from social media can be construed as a political act against the dominant and omnipresent nature of networked media and “fast capitalism” (Hesselberth, 2018).

However, disconnection can also be considered more as an individual act of “wellness” that depoliticizes discomfort with the platform economy. Within current neoliberal capitalist regimes, Fast (2021) argues that much like selective disconnection can keep an individual from leaving a platform entirely (which platform companies sometimes encourage through features that “help manage screen time”), workers think about and adapt their use of connective technologies to maintain optimal productivity and keep their jobs. Fast (2021) outlines how such reflexivity is encouraged in the workplace, for example through enabling “deep” or “slow” work, but often become uncoupled from broader political or collective goals questioning the role of constant connectivity for productivity.

These arguments resonate in today’s journalistic profession. Bossio and Holton (2021) and Bélair-Gagnon et al (2022) has most recently shown how journalists employ disconnection in response to “social media fatigue” and/or a general sense of burnout. Similarly to Fast (2021), they found that journalistic *strategic* disconnection made staying in journalism possible for many of their participants. Journalists take steps to control where and how they engage on social media in response to pressures inherent within the profession. Choosing to disconnect from particular platforms entirely or maintaining a highly differentiated presence on different platforms (for example, a strictly professional presence on Twitter and a more personal one on Instagram) were important parts of journalistic “geographies” of disconnection (Light and Cassidy, 2014), where not only platform use but also platform *choice* is mobilized for the journalist’s benefit.

Such findings echo in a moment in time when the media sector hotly debated how to adapt their social media “geographies” through their platform use. Musk’s takeover offers us the chance not only to deepen our knowledge of disconnection practices within journalism, but also how these relate to normative negotiations of what legitimate journalistic practices *should* look like, and what collective and political goals such practices should serve. With these aims in mind, this study will thus explore the following research questions:

RQ1: How did French journalists perceive the legitimacy of Twitter as a journalistic platform after Elon Musk’s takeover?

RQ2: How did French journalists respond in their utilization of Twitter as a journalistic tool?

Methods

I aimed to get a multi-faceted view of how French journalists reacted on an individual level as well as how the general discussion on social media use within the profession unfolded in the months following Musk's takeover. To achieve this, I opted for a qualitative approach, combining content analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews as my main methods.

When journalism is faced by crises, journalists tend to engage in metajournalistic discourses (Carlson, 2016): discourse by journalists about journalism. Considering that Musk's takeover could constitute a moment when journalists would feel the need to engage in metajournalistic discourse to communicate the effects on their profession to the public, I included news articles as data. Using the keywords "Elon Musk" + "Twitter" + "*journaliste/journalistes/journalisme*", I undertook a search on the Europresse platform on 25 April 2023, limiting search results to the French press published in the previous six months (25 October – 25 April). This gave me an initial corpus of 295 articles. I then removed duplicates and articles outside of the scope of my analysis. I kept my inclusion criteria fairly strict; the article had to, at least in part, be directly relevant to how Elon Musk's Twitter policies were relevant to journalists or the media industry. I did not include articles that detailed analysis of Musk's business decisions, his moderation policies, or news on working conditions of Twitter employees. I did, however, include op-eds that suited my criteria. This yielded a total of 118 articles, from 26 different media outlets. The articles were manually categorized according to their main topics of discussion, coding at the whole-article level. At least one main theme was listed per article, as well as a secondary theme for articles that delved into multiple issues.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 journalists, 8 women and 9 men. Six worked as freelancers, and the remaining 11 represented nine different media outlets between them. These were all national in their reach, but included public service, legacy media, and digital native outlets. Participant ages ranged from 23 to 47, and their level of experience ranged from one year to over 20 years. While they were all based in France, five were of different nationalities than French. I recruited participants mainly through email or direct messages on Twitter or Mastodon, with some recruited through snowball recommendations. Interviews were conducted in-person in the Paris region or over Zoom, and lasted an average between 45 minutes up to 2 hours. All participants had an active Twitter account at the time of the interview. Participants were asked about what their daily use of social media (including Twitter) looked like, what kind of audience they built on Twitter and other platforms, what kinds of discussions they had with colleagues on the role of social media in journalism, if they had made any changes to their practices in recent months, and what they saw as "good journalism" and how this related to the use of social media generally and Twitter (pre- and post-takeover) specifically.

In addition, I observed an internal all-hands meeting at a large, Paris-based legacy media outlet undertaken on the topic of "should we leave Twitter?" taking place in January 2023. I also participated in three public events (one at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris in February 2023, one from the Sciences Po journalism school in December 2022, and one webinar from the independent digital media outlet Mediapart in January 2023) that focused on the uses of digital platforms in journalism. From all these events, I took extensive observation notes to include as data. All transcripts, news articles, and notes were imported into the QualCoder

software, close-read multiple times, and subjected to a thematic analysis through a process of open coding.

The majority of the interviews and notes were undertaken in French; for this article, I have thus translated all excerpts included in the text. All in-text given names are pseudonyms.

Disenchantment with a problematic platform

The French media's reaction to changes to Twitter under Musk

Firstly, the corpus of metajournalistic news articles paints a picture of the main developments affecting journalists on Musk's Twitter. While 118 articles over a six-month period cannot be considered a massive footprint in the French press, they still show how certain policy changes on Twitter that affected journalists (negatively) were considered newsworthy. Combined with data from interviews and observations, they map the "normative faultlines" that Elon Musk repeatedly crossed in his actions as CEO, as perceived by journalists.

The distribution of the main thematic topics present in the articles are summed up in Table 1:

Table 1. Topics covered in French press related to Elon Musk and journalists

Principal topic	Percentage of articles
Suspended journalist accounts	31.4%
Criticism of Musk	15.3%
Changes to Twitter verification	15.3%
Journalists abandoning Twitter	13.6%
Alternative platforms	8.5%
Labelling of media accounts	8.5%
Explainers summarizing Musk's policies	7.6%

Note: percentages rounded to the closest decimal. Annotated at article level.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the articles over the six-month period:

Figure 1. Count of articles distributed over time

December 2022 constituted a clear peak. This period coincided with the suspension of the Twitter accounts of half a dozen high-profile US journalists who had been covering Elon Musk's activities, on the allegation that they had tweeted about the @ElonJet account, which prior to its suspension tracked Elon Musk's private jet. The suspended journalists also had track records of criticizing Elon Musk in their reporting. This theme alone constituted a third of the entire corpus, and was highly present in the minds of the journalist participants I spoke to and on the agenda of the events I participated in. During the all-hands newsroom meeting discussing what the company policy regarding Twitter use should be, a journalist described the event as "for me, the line was basically crossed", enough justification in itself for the outlet to leave Twitter.

French media interest for Musk's Twitter quickly took a nosedive in early 2023, until a second peak emerged in April. This time period coincided with a chain of erratic changes on the modalities of how "blue tick" verification labels were attributable to accounts, and the labelling of public service media as "state-affiliated". The "Twitter Blue" paid subscription

model for verification was the second most present policy change theme in the corpus and also a point of worry for the journalists interviewed. The “blue tick” has traditionally been a mark of legitimacy and trustworthiness that allows journalists to interact confidently with sources on the platform (Hewa and Trans, 2023). Putting a fee on the blue tick was perceived as another “red line” by many participants, who categorically refused to pay for it. Participating in the subscription scheme was seen as endorsing the platform financially, a step too far for many.

Robert, a freelancer and frequent Twitter user who described Musk’s takeover as a “hit on the head”, described a feeling of betrayal at the change in verification and a loss of a form of “professional recognition”:

“We used to be relatively well treated as journalists by Twitter. Now, that’s in question... When I saw this [change], I was very, very scared, because while this might seem a bit silly, I put years of work to have this legitimacy on Twitter.”

In addition to the reporting on these events, which generally focused on the negative consequences for journalists, 15.3% of the articles could be classified as overtly critical of Elon Musk in a broader sense, often labelling his actions “dangerous”, “arrogant”, or “chaotic”. This included op-eds written in protest of his takeover and platform policies as they pertained to the media industry. 13.6% of the articles discussed the prospect of journalists abandoning Twitter following the takeover. 8.5% discussed the viability of potential alternative platforms, notably Mastodon. These texts were most present in November and December 2022, and often described the state of uncertainty that journalists were faced with directly after the takeover.

This uncertainty was born out of a dilemma. These events were perceived as an *ethical* problem for the continued centrality of Twitter as a journalistic tool. Removals of verification labels, relabeling public service accounts, and suspending journalists were all measures that undermined journalistic autonomy and objectivity on the platform, and thereby directly conflicted with journalistic core values in an unprecedented way.

At the same time, there was little consensus on how the news industry should respond. With the exception of the newsroom meeting I observed, most had not received any official guidance from their newsrooms on how to adapt their Twitter usage. This may reflect specific organizational norms in French newsrooms, where top-down instructions on how to use social media are not widespread (Christin, 2018). Instead, most reported discussing the topic frequently in an informal manner with their colleagues, taking their cues from peers on how to adapt. It was often during these interactions that participants reported developing increased skepticism toward the platform.

Questioning Twitter’s value for journalism

While most journalists that I encountered considered that Twitter had become a more inhospitable place after Musk’s takeover, most did not consider this a dramatic, overnight shift. Rather, the majority emphasized that these events served as catalysts for reflection on the value of Twitter and social media more generally in the journalistic toolbox, triggered by a heightened awareness of long-standing problems.

When asked about their overall perceptions of Twitter as a platform, the word “toxic” was frequently used. Participants took issue with the way that the platform had long allowed harassment (of journalists), mis- and disinformation, and a general adversarial and hostile tone to run rampant. Particularly those journalists who had been directly affected by harassment campaigns had long stopped seeing Twitter as neutral ground, particularly as they expected that harassment would get worse under Musk. Rebecca, a freelancer who had previously been targeted by harassment, reported receiving “more dodgy DMs” after the takeover, and was under the impression that automatic content moderation was no longer working as it used to. She struggled with reconciling the professional benefits the platform had brought her with her disagreements over its new ownership, both in terms of how she perceived Elon Musk’s politics and what she considered signs of censorship of journalists:

“It's really tricky. I mean, I've been thinking about it a lot because I do have quite a strong sense of values, I suppose. Is it okay to be on this platform when this guy is doing this dubious stuff?”

Prompted by what they saw as such ethical conflicts between the platform’s new ownership and their core values, many participants had been prompted to think about how social media use stood in conflict with what they defined as “good journalism”. Louise, a senior journalist with a French legacy media, elaborated that her opposition was rooted in algorithmic logic, which she saw as antithetical to a healthy information landscape:

“Me, I’ve had a problem with Twitter for several years. For me, it didn’t come after the takeover. What I was saying about the toxic nature of it, the algorithm that encourages exposure to content we never asked to see... It’s still this logic of what will generate the most engagement. And what generates the most engagement, it is what generates the most rage, and hate. And that’s been going on for a long time. It just so happens that it’s getting worse with Musk.”

Daniel, a foreign correspondent working in Paris, had reacted particularly strongly to the suspension of journalist accounts, but was more concerned with the fact that Twitter had long been harboring extensive disinformation and harassment campaigns. He reflected that:

“I think it is problematic, as a journalist, to be part of legitimizing a platform that is working so poorly, giving the impression that it is a democratic public square, because when you are there as a journalist, playing the game as some kind of actor, you give the impression that the content is credible instead of a bunch of manipulation, so that’s why I’m opening my Mastodon account, like thousands of others.”

Participants also described similar tensions in more practical aspects of their professional values. In a manner not dissimilar to the valorization of “slow work” found in disconnection literature (Fast, 2021), participants expressed that while the 24/7, instantaneous nature of Twitter did bring practical benefits in line with the core journalistic value of “immediacy”, they had started to reflect upon how constant connectivity might harm their reporting in other ways. Ana, a junior freelancer, expressed that the speed and rapidity of Twitter came at the expense of journalistic quality:

“I mean, [on Twitter] there is a priority of giving the information as quick as possible and, of course, that is not quality... Slow journalism is very important because some

topics you cannot understand and you cannot analyze current affairs like this, you know, like that fast.”

“Slow journalism” meant going on the ground, talking to people in real life, taking the time to verify facts. Gabriel, an editor at a digital native publication, reflected on the importance of at least partially returning to “older habits”: “I think we have forgotten a bit the importance of the address book, the human source. Because we are obsessed with being fast.” Hawa, a legacy media journalist, emphasized “on-the-ground” reporting as the key ethos to her work, avoiding relying on Twitter as an information source and objecting to the way that certain journalists on Twitter failed to adhere to professional standards:

“All those who tweet a lot, it’s often dudes, they want to up their metrics and all that. I often see dudes who tweet things without sourcing them, saying that ‘I’ve seen this and I’ve understood that’ – I’m sorry, but no way!”

Almost all participants agreed that while Twitter was extremely useful to monitor the news and get an overview of a developing story, relying on it exclusively would give a warped image of events, as Twitter remained a “bubble” filled with other journalists and other public figures and could not be considered representative of the general population. This was seen as problematic in relation to the “public service” journalistic norm. Nathalie, a junior editor at a television news channel, expressed her reasoning with her growing avoidance with social media:

“When you're online, you're constantly focused on what people might be doing somewhere else. And it's way more interesting and pertinent to think about like, what are people doing like in my town and my community, where I live? I don't know, I just think people have become super disconnected from themselves and people around them. I think social media can be great, but I don't think that it should be like everything, you know?”

Several journalists experienced overall disapproval of the way that private companies held so much power over the way their industry was run, chiefly exemplified by Musk’s takeover. This was seen as conflictual to the core value of journalistic autonomy. Nathalie said that she felt disturbed that “all these things that we just use every day constantly, it’s just totally like just one random rich guy can go buy it.” Louise, who deplored the way social media had pushed journalism into seeking maximum engagement while losing “ownership” of the platforms where media outlets diffused their content, was keen to emphasize that she saw this issue as a political problem:

“Me, I’ve considered it a problem for a long time that a platform that with such a central place in public debate is the property of a private company under American jurisdiction. But for me, the solution is not at all a boycott. It has to at some point be a real reckoning with this. To start with, it means applying the DSA [Digital Services Act]⁴ to Twitter. It means making alternatives emerge so users can go elsewhere.”

Musk’s Twitter was thus not only seen as problematic due to specific platform policy changes, but also placed in a context where social media stood in conflict with journalistic norms and autonomy.

⁴ EU legislation from 2022, aiming to regulate social media platforms on a more ambitious scale.

Strategic disconnection as a tool for resistance

The measures that each participant had taken in their Twitter use after the takeover are detailed in Table 2:

Table 2. Reported changes in Twitter use among participants

Pseudonym	Job Status	Usual level of Twitter use	Adaptations after takeover	New platforms
Sarah	Junior editor, legacy print media	High (active poster)	Professional boundaries, exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon, TikTok
Ana	Freelancer, print and broadcast	Low (mainly monitoring)	Reducing usage	None
Nicolas	Staff reporter, legacy print media	Low (mainly monitoring)	Reducing usage, professional boundaries	Mastodon
Daniel	Foreign correspondent, legacy print media	High (active poster)	Reducing active posting, publicly promoting Mastodon	Mastodon
Samuel	Staff reporter, legacy print media	Medium (mainly monitoring)	Exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
Hawa	Staff reporter, legacy print media	Low (mainly monitoring)	Minimizing usage, professional boundaries	None
Jean	Freelancer, print	High (active poster)	No adaptations	None
Chloé	Staff reporter, legacy print and broadcast media	Medium (monitoring and posting)	Exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
Rebecca	Freelancer, print	High (active poster)	Reducing usage, exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
Robert	Freelancer, print	High (active poster)	Dramatically reducing usage, professional boundaries, exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
Salomé	Freelancer, print	High (active poster)	Reducing active posting	None

Gabriel	Editor, digital native print media	High (active poster)	Reducing active posting, exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon, TikTok
Thomas	Freelancer, print	High (active poster)	None	None
Stéphane	Freelancer, print	Medium (posting and monitoring)	Exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
Nathalie	Junior editor, broadcast media	Medium (mainly monitoring)	Reducing usage, professional boundaries	None
Louise	Staff reporter, legacy media, print and broadcast	High (active poster)	Reducing usage, exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon
François	Staff reporter, legacy media	Medium (posting and monitoring)	Exploring alternative platforms	Mastodon

Leaving Twitter was perceived as a sacrifice, and sometimes not even an option. The word “captive” was used several times to describe journalists’ relationship to the platform. Others used the word “addiction”. “I feel like we’re in Alcoholics Anonymous,” joked one participant in the newsroom meeting in response to assertions that the cost of leaving Twitter would be too high for most journalists in the room.

The pressure to remain did not primarily come from newsroom managers. Rather, leaving was more difficult for freelancers, especially those relying on Substack, Patreon, or similar services⁵ for their livelihood. Thomas, a freelancer who made use of such a subscription service for his income, said “if I’m not on Twitter, then I’m just not reaching people in general”. While freelancer participants often expressed an ambivalent or negative relationship with the platform, they felt like abandoning it would essentially mean losing their entire audience. Sarah, a young journalist who had recently made the switch from freelancing to a staff position, said:

“I think a lot of people whose livelihood is connected to social media are in this crisis right now where they can't leave. They can't imagine what their careers would be like without it. I think you really have to reach a certain level of success to be able to leave those platforms and maintain the position you've gained as a journalist or other public figure.”

However, even when journalists did not leave the platform, many had started to engage in strategic disconnection practices (Bossio and Holton, 2021) either as a direct response to Musk’s takeover and/or subsequent developments on Twitter, or as a more gradual process

⁵ Substack, Patreon and similar services are subscription-based funding models for journalists and other creators. Users sign up to “pledge” a certain sum of money every month in order to get access to the journalist’s content.

owing to growing disenchantment with social media in general. Louise, belonging to the latter camp, expressed very explicitly that such practices was the compromise she had reached in order to continue her work: “for a very long time, we’ve known that it’s a problematic tool, and thus I use it in such a way that I can live with that.”

Many participants had simply decided to use Twitter less. Some, like Daniel, had actively decided to post less on Twitter and used it more as a monitoring tool in order to minimize his “active” participation on the platform. For Robert, this had been a radical change. Before Musk, he had previously tweeted “up to 30 times a day”: “I was constantly on my phone, afraid of missing something”. He had now gradually moved on to Mastodon, which he perceived as “more pleasant” simply because there were fewer people there. He had put in place a system of programming five tweets to post automatically throughout the day, without actively connecting to the platform, and had also deleted the app from his phone. He reflected that this constituted a change in the way he viewed “immediacy” as journalistic norm: “before, I was all about instantaneity, and now I find it useless... now, I take a moment to reflect, to discuss things before posting.”

In the newsroom meeting, a representative of the committee that had been formed specifically on the question “should we leave Twitter?” showed the results of an internal survey carried out among staff prior to the discussion. The majority of respondents did not think that the media outlet should abandon Twitter, but that the company should stop paying for sponsored promotional campaigns on the platform, a policy for which managers expressed support. Around a fifth of respondents also considered that the newsroom should not prevent journalists from using Twitter, but that they should encourage their staff to focus on using it as a monitoring tool rather than posting actively.

Moving to other platforms was also seen as a way to mark disapproval with Musk’s policies and/or politics. Those who had started to use Mastodon often said that while Mastodon did not afford them the level of instant and global connectivity of Twitter, its infrastructure (separated into specific servers) allowed for a more manageable and cordial form of interaction. They had taken their cues from other critics of Twitter in moving to the new platform. In its public webinar, the left-leaning outlet Mediapart explained that it had started an official Mastodon long before Musk’s takeover in order to “exist digitally without being dependent on tech giants”.

Such a normative connotation was also perceived by those who chose not to migrate. During the newsroom meeting, managers of the legacy media outlet (who emphasized their organization’s commitment to “objectivity”) reasoned that completely abandoning Twitter would be seen as “taking a side”, perceived as a risky move for the company. Jean, a senior freelancer who needed to deal with sensitive political sources, also avoided Mastodon to avoid seeming “too activist”. Opting for (or avoiding) a different platform that was perceived as “less connective” by design, but also uncoupled from the interest of tech multinationals, was thus a way for journalists to “geographically” (Light and Cassidy, 2014) navigate their practices in line with their political and professional values.

Another form of disconnection could be identified in how many participants had established stronger professional boundaries in their social media habits. Many (also in line with Bossio and Holton’s (2021) findings) reserved platforms other than Twitter for their personal use, frequently Instagram. These boundaries for Twitter use were similar for many participants—

summed up by Nicolas, a legacy media reporter, as “nothing private, no political commentary... do not enter a debate, stay as serious as possible, as neutral as possible.”

Nicolas, as well as other participants who had stable positions at legacy media outlets, reported feeling “more protected” from pressures to establish a “personal brand” on Twitter, which facilitated the maintenance of strict professional boundaries. This was again in contrast to freelancers, who felt the need to add a “personal touch” to their online presence and felt less able to opt out of such practices. Sarah and Rebecca emphasized that seeming “authentic” on Twitter was important to give sources and editors a good impression, at the same time as they also maintained certain boundaries (for example, Sarah refrained from posting photos of herself). Other inequalities also influenced participants’ need to set boundaries. Hawa expressed relief that her stable employment position meant she did not have to maintain a personal presence on Twitter, which she largely found not only illegitimate but also dangerous to her personally – as a Black woman, she avoided exposing herself to racist online violence: “if my name had been Clara, with blonde hair and blue eyes, we would not have had this discussion... In my position, I negotiate with the realities of the job, but I try to protect myself as much as possible.”

Professional boundaries also helped to emphasize Twitter’s role as “just a tool”, something to leave behind at the end of a workday. Robert said: “Honestly, we have to take Twitter down to what it is: a simple commercial service. We have had the tendency to mystify it a bit too much, as journalists.” Such a view of Twitter helped journalists to distance themselves from the platform in the ways they found compatible with their values and professional needs, even as the platform underwent unwelcome changes. Reducing usage, moving to smaller platforms, and maintaining boundaries were all ways in which journalists reconciled their continued use of Twitter as a professional tool with the normative discomfort they felt about the platform under its new leadership.

Discussion and conclusion

The above findings not only paint a picture of how journalists in France reacted in their attitudes and practices to Musk’s takeover as CEO of Twitter, contributing empirical evidence of journalists’ changing social media practices, but also show how this event provoked journalists to reconsider the continued legitimacy of social media use in journalism. The changes enacted by Musk conflicted with core values of the journalistic profession, highlighting a cognitive dissonance that participants had carried with them for a long time regarding how Twitter fit with their professional values.

The takeover shook up old habits – many of the areas of discomfort that journalists experienced with Twitter were by no means unique to the platform. This led both individual journalists and entire media organizations to reflect upon their normative priorities in their practices more broadly. As Elon Musk as CEO of Twitter embodied the growing (and possibly outsized) influence of the commercial tech sector, this moment in time highlighted a need for the media sector to emphasize its autonomy. For some, this meant reemphasizing traditional journalistic values and more “old-school” working practices.

The primary contribution of this paper lies in illustrating these normative reflections and how they challenged the normalization narrative of social media adoption in the media sector (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018; Dagoula, 2022). Musk’s Twitter conflicted directly with journalistic values, making its central role as a journalistic tool increasingly uncomfortable.

The suspension of journalist accounts and the commodification of the “blue tick” verification system threatened the core values of public service and autonomy. While putting a price tag on blue pixels next to usernames could be perceived as a largely symbolic gesture, journalists perceived it as an invasion of crass commercial logic into journalistic practices that seek to emphasize the duty of journalists to provide the public with trustworthy information. Similar changes could always be rolled out to whatever platform takes over in popularity, a fear highly present among my participants, which prompted them to generalize their criticisms to tech giants beyond Twitter itself. Even if social media was not fully “denormalized” in journalistic practice, the question “should we continue to use these tools in this way?” rose high on the agenda with Musk’s takeover. This may not have instantly toppled social media’s legitimacy within the media sector, but it destabilized its position.

My second empirical contribution is to illustrate how journalists cope with such changes. Bossio and Holton (2021) and Bélair-Gagnon et al (2022) have argued that strategic disconnection – meaning *limiting* and *drawing boundaries* around social media use, and not necessarily abandoning platforms altogether – is a tool that allows journalists to continue their work in a way that is compatible with their well-being. I add to their findings by showing how strategic disconnection also serves as a normative marker that helps journalists continue their work in accordance with their professional, personal, and political values. Strategic disconnection allowed participants to continue their work without too much cognitive dissonance in a time of great uncertainty. I also note that the differences I found between freelancers and staff journalists in how free they felt to pursue disconnection points to the continued importance of considering precarity as a fundamental shaper of the choices available to media workers in a digital context.

This paper mapped out only the initial reaction to Musk’s takeover, when its full effects could not yet be estimated. In order to more thoroughly map out the effects of changes in the digital journalistic toolbox, future research would need to both explore other contexts (particularly those outside of the Western world) and methods that can more appropriately gauge the scale of such changes in behavior. For example, more computational analyses of journalist Twitter behavior before and after Musk’s takeover would greatly complement our current understanding. More granular differentiation into how different types of journalists responded in different ways (who deleted their profile, who moved on to which platforms?) would also help our understanding of how journalists navigate digital public space.

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