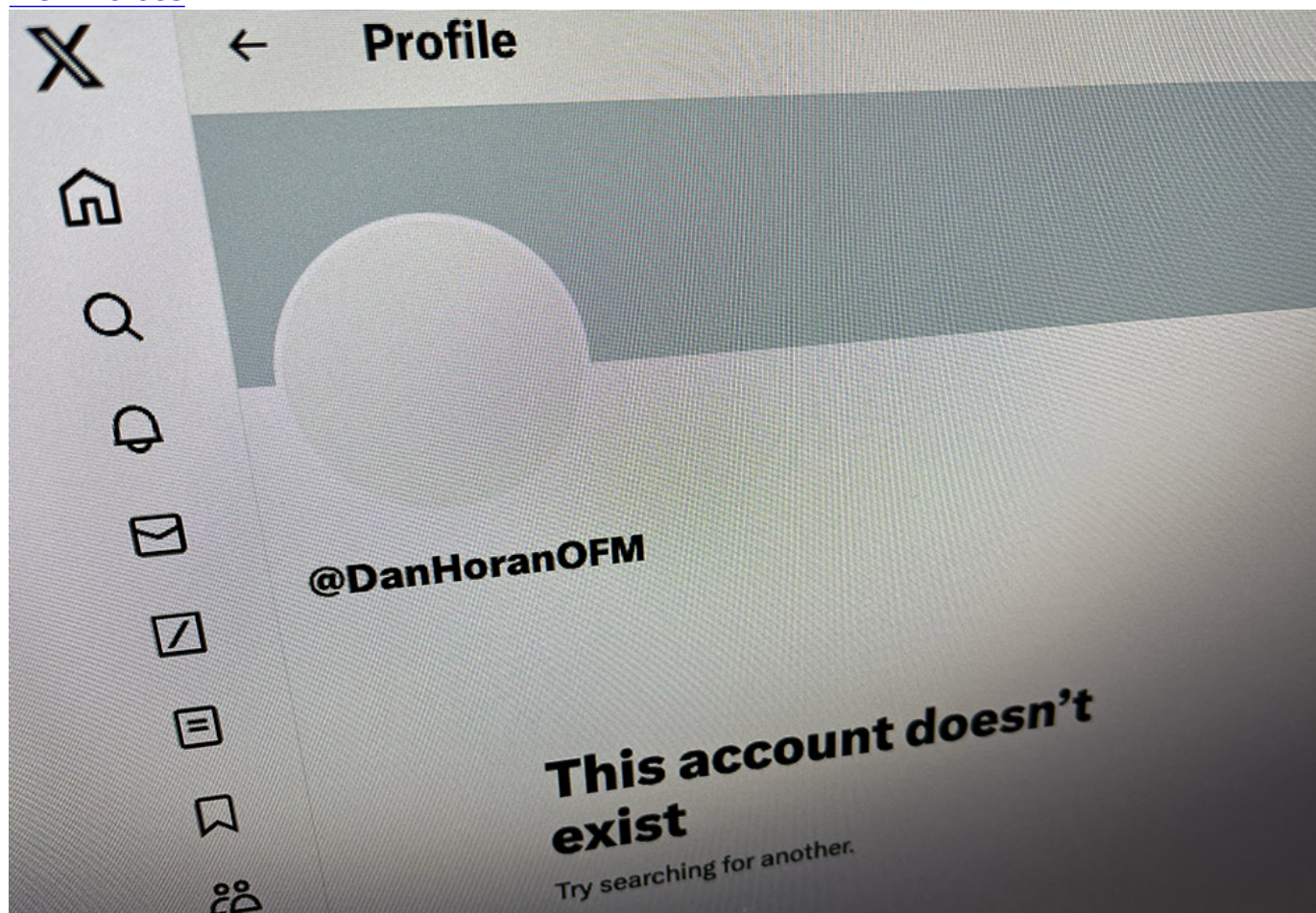


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by Daniel P. Horan

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I have had enough. Like so many other people, over the years I have found social media engagement to be a two-edged sword. Early on, well more than a decade ago, the new technology and the genuine enthusiasm for people to connect and share information was attractive.

As the cliché goes, that was "a simpler time." There were fewer trolls, a more optimistic spirit, and even new friendships formed across space and time zones.

But even during those better times in the late aughts and early 2010s, with the still-new Facebook and the infancy of Twitter (now "X"), the shadow side was emerging. What has happened since [Elon Musk purchased Twitter](#) in late October 2022 has been truly transformative, and not for the better.

As [CNN reported](#) in October of this year:

The company barely resembles its former self — and not only because Musk renamed it "X" and did away with its iconic blue bird branding. Through a dizzying and haphazard barrage of changes, Musk has transformed a profitable company once regarded as the world's go-to source for breaking news and political commentary into a widely ridiculed platform that's fighting just to break even and crippled by debt; that's struggling to manage spam and disinformation; that's alienated some of its biggest advertisers and users; and that's casting about for purpose.

After I returned to the platform last year following [my 2022 Lenten "digital fast,"](#) I found myself changed by the experience and engaged less often on Twitter, using it primarily to share news about upcoming events or articles. As a result, I didn't fully realize just what a cesspool of toxicity, hatred and discrimination the site had become. By July of this year, I began to see the terrible changes more clearly, and [wrote about it in this column](#).

But I stayed, even as millions of other people were deciding not to stick around.

As the technology reporter Alex Kantrowitz [wrote in Slate](#) earlier this fall, "X is shrinking meaningfully under Elon Musk. Since Musk bought Twitter in October 2022, it's lost approximately 13 percent of its app's daily active users, according to new data from mobile research firm Apptopia ... and its rebrand as X only accelerated the

decline." That amounts to more than 20 million users!

I am now among this group of people who will no longer abide the hate-mongering algorithms; the Wild-West-like trolling; the rise in antisemitism, racism, homophobia and transphobia; and the absence of virtually any constructive discourse.

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Musk's [reinstatement](#) of previously banned accounts is emblematic of the shifting context and tone of the platform. Many of these accounts were banned in the "before times" [for very good reason](#), often having to do with targeted harassment, conspiracy theory propagation, white supremacy, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ speech, among other types of despicable behavior.

X now feels like the world the Joker unleashed in Christopher Nolan's 2008 film "The Dark Knight." with a massive number of users embracing the Joker's ethos summarized best by Batman's butler, Alfred, in the movie: "Some men just want to watch the world burn."

But I don't want to watch the world burn and I certainly don't enjoy it, mostly because those who are being sacrificed in the process, targeted and harassed, dehumanized and attacked, are the most vulnerable in our society. It is those who occupy the most marginalized and precarious locations in our communities for whom the vitriol is the worst.

The final straw for me came last week when I wrote a simple transgender-affirming post. In a time when trans folks are especially under attack, even in some spaces and communities where they should feel most welcome and comfortable, I wanted to offer a positive signal, to say, in effect, "I see you, I support you."

What happened in short order was a new experience, even for me. Because of my research, writing, teaching and public speaking on matters like LGBTQ+ inclusion and anti-racism, I'm used to being attacked by hateful, bad-faith actors — including many who identify as Catholic, and even some clergy. But the sheer volume and maliciousness of this response was novel, quick and deafening.

Since this onslaught — which led me to "protect" my account (a setting that allows only those who already follow you to see and interact with your feed), something I

have never done in the nearly 14 years I've been on Twitter — I looked into what might be at the heart of this disturbing shift.

What I learned was that such a massive hateful attack from thousands of accounts occurred in response to a trans-affirming post is not coincidental. This is exactly the kind of thing Musk has been promoting. According to CNN, earlier this year Musk [removed transgender protections](#) from Twitter's hateful conduct policy. This has resulted in [growing hostility](#) and targeting of trans and nonbinary people on the platform.

Additionally, the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, [condemned Musk](#) in November for granting paid access on his platform to an organization promoting a "fact-free" transphobic film, which was earlier rejected by YouTube and several film festivals that refused to air it.

I suffer from no delusion that my departure will have any meaningful impact on the hateful landscape that is now X. My only goal is to leave a space that is decidedly, even proudly, hostile and violent.

According to an [Associated Press story](#) in June, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups have identified Twitter as "the worst major social media platform when it comes to LGBTQ+ safety."

As a cisgender man who advocates for transgender inclusion, I don't experience anything near the hate and vitriol, let alone the real violence and discrimination, that my trans siblings do on a daily basis in their efforts to simply live their lives as they are. My departure from Twitter is not because I personally cannot withstand the hurricane of hate and acrimony, although I do not enjoy it and it is obviously unpleasant.

My departure from Twitter is because the scales have finally tipped decisively and incontrovertibly toward the "bad" side of the good vs. bad evaluative equation. There is no amount of "good" left on the platform to justify giving my attention or energy to it when it has become a space intentionally designed to promote the dehumanization of and encourage violence (psychological, spiritual and even physical) against the most vulnerable of our communities.

I suffer from no delusion that my departure will have any meaningful impact on the hateful landscape that is now X. That is not my intention. My only goal is to leave a space that is decidedly, even proudly, hostile and violent.

I will continue to serve the church and community with my academic and public scholarship, as well as commentary in [these pages](#), on the [podcast I co-host](#), and on the few other social media platforms I deem less toxic.

In the meantime, I do hope someone will rein in the platform formerly known as Twitter, if only for the sake of vulnerable peoples' mental health and physical safety. Last week, the European Commission announced that it was [opening an investigation](#) under its new social media laws into X and Musk's leadership of the company in the wake of its role in rising discrimination.

Maybe things will change, but in the meantime I won't wait around for that.