

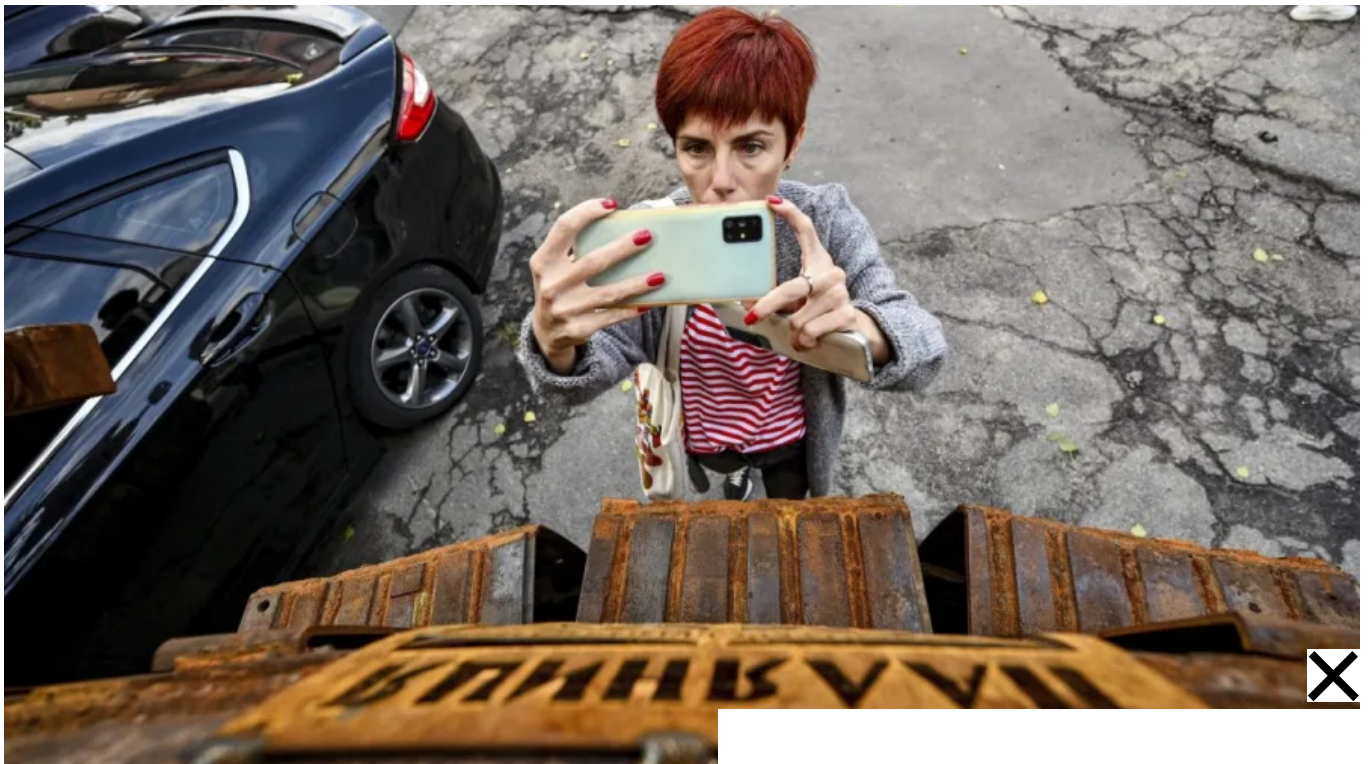
SILICON VALLEY

Twitter's potential collapse could wipe out vast records of recent human history

What happens when the world's knowledge is held in a quasi-public square owned by a private company that could soon go out of business?

By Chris Stokel-Walker

November 11, 2022



Almost from the time the first tweet was posted in 2006, the platform has been used to record world events. The platform has been used to record ongoing war in Ukraine. It's also captured our pub

But experts are worried that if Elon Musk tanks the company, these rich seams of media and conversation could be lost forever. Given his admission to employees in a November 10 call that Twitter could face bankruptcy, it's a real and present risk.

Musk himself acknowledges that Twitter is a public forum, and it's this fact that makes the potential loss of the platform so significant. Twitter has become integral to civilization today. It's a place where people document war crimes, discuss key issues, and break and report on news.

It's where the US raid that would result in Osama bin Laden's death was first announced. It's where people get updates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It's where news of the downing of flight MH17, a Malaysia Airlines plane that was likely shot down by pro-Russia forces in Ukraine in 2014, first surfaced. It is a living, breathing historical document. And there's real concern it could disappear soon.



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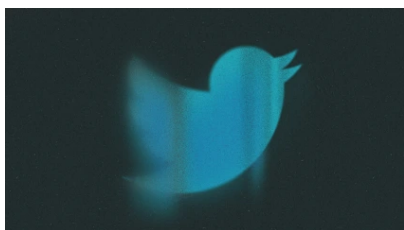
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One insider says the company's current staffing isn't able to sustain the platform.

“If Twitter was to ‘go in the morning’, let's say, all of this—all of the firsthand evidence of atrocities or potential war crimes, and all of this potential evidence—would simply disappear,” says Ciaran O'Connor, senior analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a global think tank. Information gathered as OSINT, has been used to document war crimes and acts of terrorism. As memory fades.

Part of what makes this so challenging is that the data is stored on the servers of a single company, says colleague Elise Thomas, senior OSINT analyst with the ISD.

It's a problem we'll have to deal with many times over the coming decades, she says: “This is perhaps the first really big test of that.”

“In one sense, this actually represents an enormous opportunity for future historians—we’ve never had the capacity to capture this much data about any previous era in history,” she explains. But that enormous scale presents a huge storage problem for organizations.

For eight years, the US Library of Congress took it upon itself to maintain a public record of all tweets, but it stopped in 2018, instead selecting only a small number of accounts’ posts to capture. “It never, ever worked,” says William Kilbride, executive director of the Digital Preservation Coalition. The data the library was expected to store was too vast, the volume coming out of the firehose too great. “Let me put that in context: it’s the Library of Congress. They had some of the best expertise on this topic. If the Library of Congress can’t do it, that tells you something quite important,” he says.

That’s problematic, because Twitter is teeming with significant content from the past 16 years that could help tomorrow’s historians understand the world of today.

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“In a way, Twitter has become a kind of aggregator of information,” says Eliot Higgins, founder of open-source investigators Bellingcat, who helped bring the perpetrators who downed MH17 to justice. “A lot of this stuff you see from Ukraine, the footage comes from Telegram channels that other people are following, but they’re sharing it on Twitter.” Twitter has made it easier to categorize and consume content from almost any niche in the world, tapping into a real-time news feed of relevant information from both massive organizations and small, independent voices. Its absence would be keenly felt.

The disappearance of huge volumes of information from the internet is not a new problem. In 2017, YouTube was accused of harming investigato humanity in Syria by permanently deleting accoun eventually reneged, realizing the importance it pla

“I don’t think that’s going to happen with Elon Mu immediately respond to a request for comment ask permanent storage of Twitter’s history of posts in t been extensively reported, no longer has a commu... ..

It’s not just OSINT researchers who are worried. US public agencies’ concern about the loss of their verified status highlights the fact that lots of official statements by governments and

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I made it big on Twitter. Now I don't think I can stay.

To be fair, it was already aging out of relevance before Musk took

Many users have back up their data permanently stored snapshots of Twitter web pages in a more reliable place than Twitter's own servers. But both methods are not without their own issues: multimedia often isn't stored alongside such methods of archiving tweets—

documenting Russia's invasion of Twitter—while accessing the information easily requires knowing the exact URL of any given tweet. “You may have trouble finding that if it’s not already been preserved in some way somewhere else on the internet,” says Higgins.

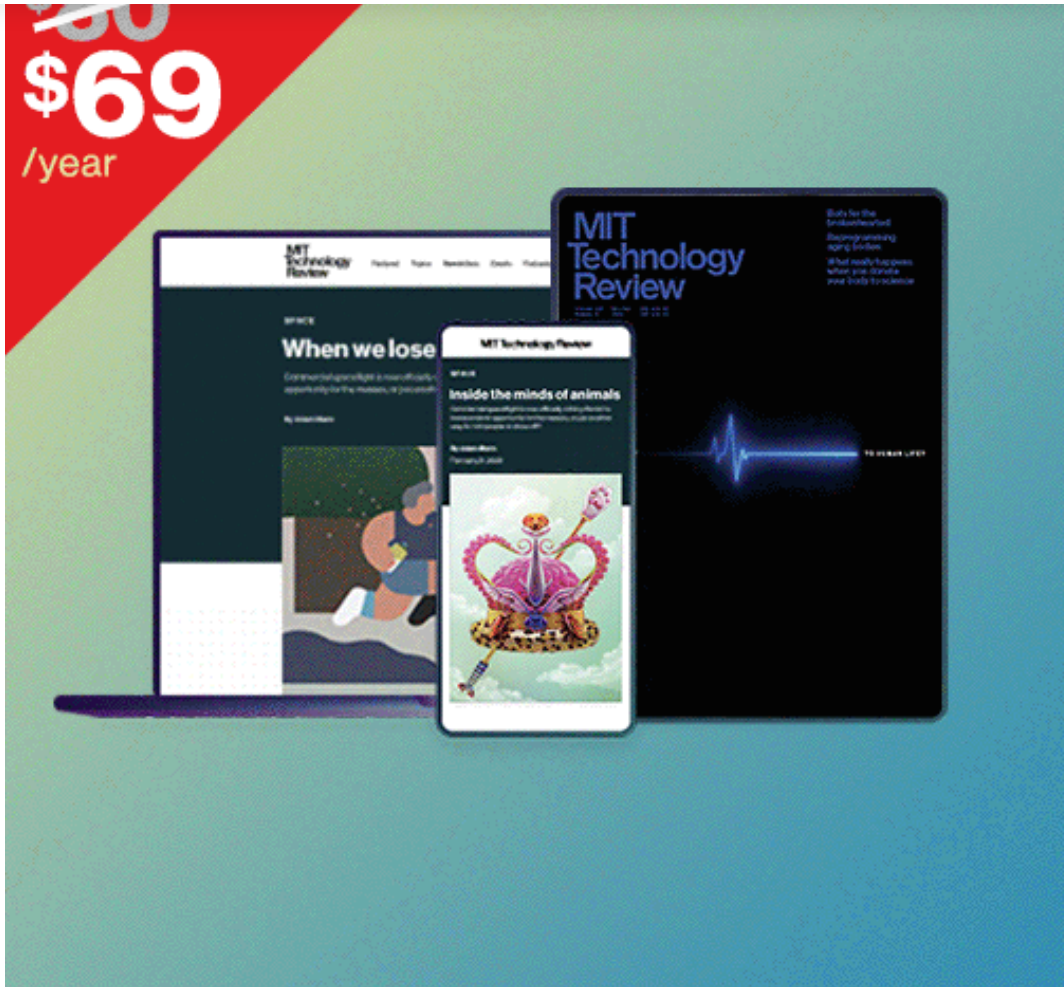
Some users are relying on third-party services usually used to make long Twitter threads more decipherable, such as [Thread Reader](#)—but trying to turn those into archiving tools is not an ideal solution either. “The companies behind those services are almost certainly smaller and more transient than Twitter itself, and there’s no real reason to think the content will be preserved forever there either—especially as once Twitter is gone, so is the Twitter thread unrolling company’s business model,” says Thomas.

“There’s a nice way to turn the lights out,” pleads Kilbride, who asks that if Twitter goes under, Musk doesn’t pull the plug immediately. “A managed, structured close-down to the service has to be preferred to the chaos we’ve got now,” he says.

Thomas doesn’t have a good solution to the problem, and as with much of Twitter at present, the [outlook isn’t exactly rosy](#), she says. “We’re going to lose such a lot of digital history if Twitter goes kaput without warning.”

Note: we updated the headline **T**

by Chris Stokel-Walker



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Twitter may have lost more than a million users since Elon Musk took over

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By Jillian C. York

Illustration by Rose Wong

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