

The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

The Emergent Order of Twitter

Andy Smarick

When a set of arrangements is making people miserable, coercion is often a big part of the explanation. Think of authoritarianism, discrimination, or vigilantism, where individuals suffer because of conditions they can't change, imposed by others possessing power.

But in some cases, incentives, not coercion, are to blame. This happens often in markets and in personal relationships—and it's true also of Twitter. The environment is such that free people, making individually rational decisions, harm themselves and the group as a whole, creating suboptimal but—paradoxically—highly stable outcomes. History, economics, psychology, and sociology are rife with examples. Or, looking to game theory, we might say that Twitter is a dilemma in which we are all prisoners.

When misery is caused by coercion, the solution is typically straightforward: Stop those with illegitimate power from hurting people. But when misery is caused by voluntary activity, the proper intervention is less clear. Respect for liberty generally requires avoiding the use of a central authority—whether the state or Silicon Valley algorithmic overlords—to override the lawful, morally permissible choices of individuals. Even when there is general agreement that peoples' choices are causing damage to themselves or others, authorizing an authority to intervene also means authorizing it to decide what the *right* outcomes are, what constitutes enough social “damage” to justify intervention, what kinds of penalties should be applied and when, and so on. State authorities, when granted such power, may well go on to claim they've found negative externalities warranting suppression of people's choices in other areas—how they spend their income, where they live, which organizations they join, how they raise their children. There is always a technocrat, a redistributionist, or a “nudger” convinced that the world would be much improved if her learning and sense of justice could replace everyone else's.

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No one is forced to use Twitter. It is a mess founded on voluntary choices. So, although it may be doing harm to individuals, degrading public discourse and social norms, we should begin by appreciating that its users must be currently assessing that their participation provides them greater benefits than costs.

A fruitful approach might therefore not be to bemoan Twitter's downsides or to infringe upon individuals' liberty to speak and associate in this way, but to start by understanding *what* the utility is that keeps people on the platform. We may then appreciate that Twitter is bound to change—perhaps even to fix itself—as users change their assessment. Our aim should be to seek not engineering or policy solutions but a gradual, organic transformation of the platform by the users themselves.

What benefits does Twitter offer its users? Obviously, it is a way to hear about news and opinions. It also helps us to manage FOMO, the fear of missing out on trends and memes and fun things our friends are doing. And it gives us a chance to self-promote and virtue-signal. Although these are usually derogatory terms, they can also simply acknowledge that we have a need to be recognized for our worth and to be seen as on the side of the angels. Many journalists and other content providers are also under pressure by business managers to prioritize “engagement,” which manifests in everything from clickbait headlines to provocative content to engaging directly, if often pointlessly, with users on social media. Twitter also serves as a virtually cost-free venting mechanism, catharsis at the fingertips. Your fury can be decompressed almost instantaneously with nothing but a few keystrokes.

These benefits have a common feature. They all enable us to feel like we matter—that we are part of something, that we're being heard, that we're on the right side. In an era of profound dislocation, Twitter offers something resembling community. We can find our tribe and our anti-tribe. We can speak and get a reaction. By simply typing a few words and hitting “tweet,” we are given voice. With every reply, like, retweet, and new follower we are given a sense of efficacy. The prospects of our meme or witty retort going viral offers us the potential of mattering a great deal.

Unfortunately, with Twitter the costs of bad behavior are generally delayed or are felt by individuals other than the actor: It's the target of the outrage mob rather than the instigator who loses her job; the full consequences of destroying social norms are only felt far down the line. So the typical user's short-term cost-benefit analysis approves more tweeting and fails to warn against Twitter's anti-social use.

Of course we make many of our decisions in less analytical and more impulsive ways, especially when we are feeling anxious, disconnected, or under assault. Splurging on that pricey item, yelling at a friend, or relapsing into an addiction doesn't make sense in the long term, but by a calculation in the moment it does make sense, when the benefits feel so immediate and exaggerated, and the costs so abstract and distant. Similarly, our hunger for meaning and connection is so acute in this historical moment that we inflate social media's immediate gains and discount its future costs.

However, because so many users have had years of experience with Twitter, its corrosive consequences, once far on the horizon, can now be felt by many of us. We have witnessed its depressive and isolating effects, and we have seen how it harms relationships and civil discourse. We should recognize the platform's trouble with profits in recent years as a lagging indicator of its social costs.

The good news is that, because voluntary systems allow for a gradual, evolutionary process of self-reform, we can expect that behavior on Twitter may improve on its own.

Voluntary associations, unlike systems of coercion, include participants' right of exit. Those engaged can disengage at any time and for any reason. Second, norms and traditions are highly malleable, since they are not encoded in legislation. Dissenters can arise at any moment to challenge them. The shifting views and actions of countless individuals then continuously remold the communities and systems of which they are part. Consider customs related to manners, courting, chivalry, child-rearing, and so on. These didn't change suddenly or at the direction of a central authority; shifts were organic and gradual, but their influence was systemic in scale.

So while great attention has been paid to Twitter's official terms of use and its enforcement thereof, the more important and lasting changes will almost certainly be brought about by individuals' changes in behavior resulting from their recalibrated cost-benefit analysis. Twitter will change as some users drop out and others decide to reshape its norms of conduct—both actions that lead users to make ever new assessments about how to use Twitter, and whether using it at all is worth it.

There have already been high-profile examples of fed-up media figures, politicians, and celebrities quitting Twitter. These instances of exit are likely to be bellwethers, not outliers: Other users will likely follow suit, and this could cause a cascade. A platform with fewer users and less

attention offers the remaining users less voice, efficacy, and sense of community. The benefit part of the cost–benefit ratio will drop—which will make remaining users less willing to bear the costs, perhaps decreasing their willingness to tolerate bad behavior.

Gradual changes in norms on the platform could lead to even more significant improvements in the average Twitter user’s experience. For instance, there is currently a clear incentive to join a mob vilifying someone who has done something you find objectionable. Doing so is virtually costless to the participant, and it can contribute to the effort to get the offender chastened or fired. But a change of certain norms might well produce a new sense of proportion. People might become less willing to offer gut-wrenching public apologies for minor infractions, and employers might become more willing to privately admonish and forgive transgressors. If so, the wind would be taken out of the mob’s sails. Similarly, if Twitter users begin reprimanding those who dredge up a public figure’s embarrassing tweets from when she was 14, that practice could disappear. Or, if journalists agree to stop engaging with anyone disrespectful or anonymous, disrespect and anonymity could decrease.

A social-media community is not an institution, a forced or planned entity *instituted* by a powerful authority. It is more like a garden; it *forms* organically and with decentralized tending, but not centralized direction. The path to altering an institution is clear: Whatever powerful device, such as legislation or regulation, that was employed to bring it about can be employed to change it. Organic formations, on the other hand, emerge through voluntary responses to conditions and incentives. And they evolve because of voluntary responses to changes in these conditions and incentives. If we want Twitter and social media to change, we need to approach the problem more like gardeners, not engineers.