JUST TECH

FIELD REVIEW

#RIP Twitter: The Conditions of Black Social Media Platform Migration

By: Rianna Walcott

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Walcott, Rianna. "#RIP Twitter: The Conditions of Black Social Media Platform Migration." Just Tech. Social Science Research Council. April 3, 2024. DOI: https:/doi.org/10.35650/JT.3068.d.2024.

ABSTRACT

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter on October 31, 2022 has left Black Twitter reeling in the wake of over a year of turbulence, with constantly changing affordances rendering the service less and less functional. In response to this upheaval the future of the platform is under question, as Black users debate whether to stay and weather Twitter's declining functions, or to turn to other platforms that could potentially fill the space left behind following the decline of the social media giant.

This field review frames the history of Black Twitter as both coparticipants in the platform's design and transgressive reconceptualizers of its intended functions, as a practice of adapting Twitter into a viable home. Using migration as a metaphor, I examine how transmigration (Sharpe 2016)—both the movement across space *and* the changing of space from one form to another—is a condition of transatlantic Blackness that has mapped onto the digital. Black Migration—both voluntary and involuntary, physical and digital—converts unfamiliar and hostile terrain into a home via transformations that adapt spaces to Black community needs. I argue that processes of transforming social media spaces function as an ownership claim for Black users, and position Twitter as a central platform within a hypernarrative ecology of social networking systems, to question what factors are instrumental in coaxing Black users to social network services to form discursive communities.

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now X, but referred to as Twitter throughout this piece) on October 31, 2022, has left Black Twitter users reeling in the wake of over a year of turbulence, with constantly changing affordances and increased hostility toward marginalized users rendering the service less and less functional. In response to this upheaval, Black users have been debating whether to stay and weather Twitter's declining functions, or to turn to other platforms that subsume some of Twitter's

functions and could potentially fill the space left behind following the decline of the social media giant. At the time of writing, Black Twitter's continued success—or failure—is still undetermined, though a plethora of potential replacements have been released over the past year, including Spill, Threads, Bluesky, Spoutible, and Mastodon, yet none have matched the user base of Twitter, Black or otherwise.

This liminal moment encourages interpretive flexibility—i.e., the ability for a technical artifact to represent different things to different actors (Doherty, Coombs, and Loan-Clarke 2006)—as user practices and perceptions of the platform's functionality varies between user groups. This applies on the macro level, as Black Twitter users adopt and adapt the service in ways that are conducive to Black discursive and cultural practices (Brock 2020; Lockett 2021), and the micro level, as the current ongoing modifications and revisions to the site's features sustain varying intra-community opinions on Twitter's continued viability as a Black community gathering place.

If the perception changes, that Twitter is no longer a space hospitable to the Black discourse community, this becomes self-fulfilling.

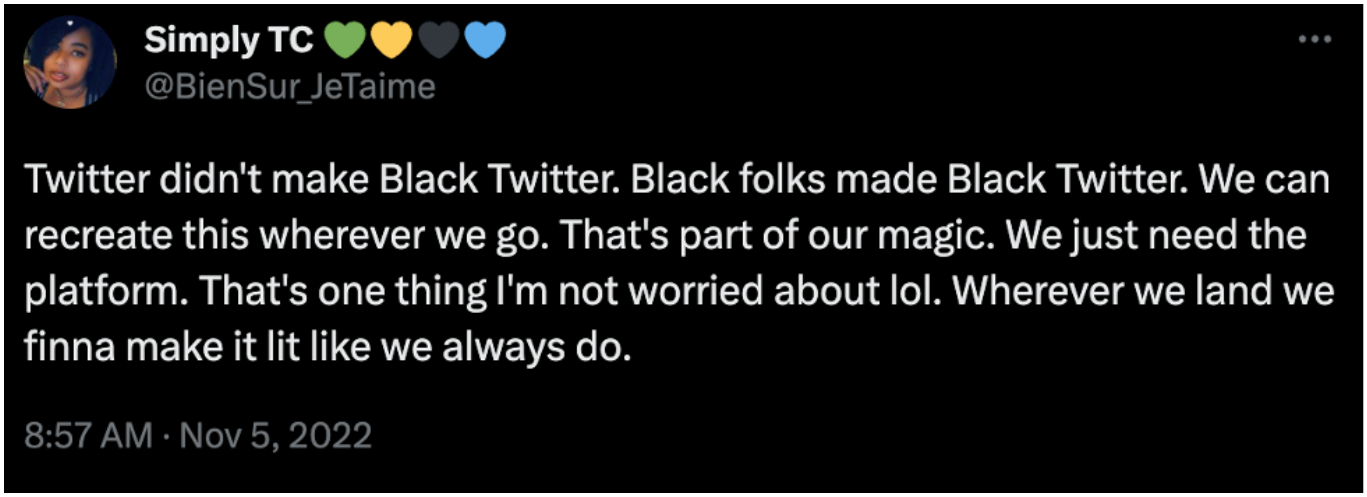
If we consider social media networks as an ecology of platforms (Madianou and Miller 2013) where users may prioritize some platforms over others based on what each allows them to do, but also based on their imagined or real audience (Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011), then the *perception* of where a Black audience is, is of equal importance to where they actually are. If the perception changes, that Twitter is no longer a space hospitable to the Black discourse community, this becomes self-fulfilling.

Black Twitter has been defined as a "heterogenous Black discourse collective, bound by certain cultural and digital commonplaces in pursuit of similar and sometimes competing goals" (Brock 2020, 87) but is a collective that is self-referential, that speaks of itself as though it exhibits some hegemonic identity. Black Twitter, in imagining itself as a homophilic collective, relies on what Marwick and boyd call the "imagined audience" (2011), a faith in a shared network that is an active "collaborator in the identity and content presented by the speaker" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 130). The imagined homophilic network becomes self-fulfilling; by directly interpellating the intended audience, that audience is able to speak back.

The paradox at the heart of this conversation is that it encourages thinking about Black Twitter users as a monolith, who might move *en masse*. This mirrors the ontological uncertainty of Blackness itself: A performance of a unified experience and aesthetic where in fact some subcommunities hold hegemonic power over others in defining collective behavior and, in this case, orientation to digital space. Black Twitter is a discourse collective that has named itself, thereby laying a claim of ownership over Twitter. Though not a homogenous community, this legibility as a collective that has staked a racialized, geospatial claim allows for a reading of Twitter—or at least this part of it—as a Black space.

For the purposes of this analysis, I am collapsing the distinction between the Black Twitter *user* and Black Twitter itself, thereby engaging Black Twitter as a collective. By sacrificing nuance and reading

Black Twitter as a single space, we can read it as a community that can be negotiated via geographical terms, as a digital/physical community that is *mobile*. Just as Black Twitter refers to itself as a legible group, irrespective of (inter)national/regional variance, when discussing Twitter's future, this field review focuses on the response of Black Twitter to the acquisition of Twitter, and the various responses that users have to changing affordances and reputation. I ask, what are the conditions that dictate platform migration? How does the migrant user lay claim to digital space? What conditions will push Black users from one space and pull them to the next?



Screenshot taken by author. Shared with permission.

Positioning Black Twitter within a Transplatform Network

Joining a new network is not necessarily commensurate with leaving the old one. I introduce the term *hypernarrativity* as both a standard feature of social network use—i.e., part of the conditions of belonging to a transplatform ecosystem (Florini 2019) —as well as a marker of platform decline that may indicate the slippage of a platform from peak popularity.

Hypernarrativity is conditional on transplatform ecologies and polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013). Coined by Wagener (2020), hypernarrativity speaks to the movement of the same topic across digital spaces, and the ways that those digital objects mutate across and are mediated by platform affordances and conventions. The multi-sited environment, or "polymedia" of social networking services encourages us to think of media platforms as an environment of affordances (Madianou and Miller 2013, 170). Users oscillate between these different environments based on their interpersonal connections and the cultural norms of using different media, exploiting different affordances to different effect. For example, Black Twitter users, having found community on Twitter, may now also move to follow those same users across newly-emergent platforms—Mastodon link in bio!—or to engage offline.

> *Twitter's value to Black users…is partially in its position as the center of an interdiscourse web, a digital homeland that connects to other platforms in the ecosystem.*

The ecosystem of social network sites is reliant on Wagener's interdiscourses (2020), which explains how discourse takes place in *webs*, always has links to other discourses, and never exists in isolation. For example, conversations from Twitter are screenshotted and put on Instagram, and the hypercirculation of digital productions leads to the hypernarrativity of content (Wagener 2020, 156). Twitter, with its reputation for innovation, immediacy, and novelty, is at the center of this web as digital objects migrate to and away from the platform, and are engaged with via Black discursive rituals that rely on that immediacy and novelty, such as signifying, a Black rhetorical practice that encodes multiple meanings and is reliant on shared cultural knowledge and competencies (Brock 2012, 2020; Florini 2014, 2019). Twitter's value to Black users, therefore, is partially in its position as the center of an interdiscourse web, a digital homeland that connects to other platforms in the ecosystem.

To better understand Black Twitter's position in this ecosystem, we can examine the circulation of both digital media and Black folks across digital mediums through the same terms applied to physical migration. The digital and physical aspects of migration— such as refugee usage of mobile phones (Risam 2018) and the connective capacity of the listserv for African diasporic communities in facilitating community organizing practices in new (digital and/or physical) terrain—work as a bridge between home and host country, and as a connection to Black transnational issues (Johnson 2018; Ebeling 2003).

Migration, as a term, has subtexts and varying social determinants but is generally a term applied to "persons moving within or between countries to improve their economic and social conditions" inclusive of those circumstances where that movement is forced (Douglas, Cetron, and Spiegel 2019, 1) and so includes the category of refugee. In visualizing Black migration as movement through a polymedia web, I acknowledge that migration is not unanimous, linear, or unidirectional, but contains interruptions, changes in direction, and pauses (Risam 2019). To think about migration is also to acknowledge those who *remain*—entire ethnic groups rarely migrate either physically or digitally, and the Black diaspora itself parallels the multi-sited platform ecosystem.

Heberle's writing on "push" and "pull" factors that stimulate rural migration (1938) provides a useful lens through which to analyze Black movement. If push factors are stimuli toward migration to escape the pressures of where once was home (Heberle, 933), and pull factors are social structures that draw the migrant toward a new location (Heberle, 945), for Black people these bi-directional catalysts make migratory movement both the push of fleeing harm *and*the pull ofseeking opportunity; displacement from home *and*the claiming of a new one.

To speak to the labor of claiming new homes, I follow Sharpe's (2016) work and borrow the term *transmigration* to reference both the movement across space *and*the changing of spacefrom one form to another. Sharpe introduces "wake work" as the act of surviving, observing, and mediating Black exclusion and ontological negation (14). In outlining her mother's attempts to make a livable home space within an unlivable, anti-Black world, Sharpe codifies both the movement and the work of creating home as a Black ontological practice.

Black Diasporic Migration and Making Home

Migration, both voluntary and involuntary, has long been entangled with Blackness. While labor may confer some level of ownership claim to both offline and online space, they are ultimately governed by white and Western forces that influence Black movement. From the forced migration of the transatlantic slave trade; the back to Africa movement; the Great Migration from and then back to the US South by African Americans in the twentieth century; the mass migration of Caribbean people to Great Britain following the Second World War; to the contemporary African and Caribbean migration to the United States, Black history is characterized by migration. In each case, on arrival, the transgressive space-making practices of Black communities remain "in excess of the logics of racial-spatial violence" (Hawthorne 2019, 7). This challenges the framing of Black people as victims of continuous dispossession and displacement, in favor of privileging Black world making practices (Hawthorne, 5). The migration of Black people *changes* the spaces they land in, transforming them to be more reflective of the Black people within them.

Gilroy uses the metaphor of ships in motion between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing principle for the *Black Atlantic,* a transnational historical and theoretical lens of analysis that "transcends both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (1995, 19) and connects Black struggles toward "emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship" (Gilroy, 16) across multiple directions and timelines. This metaphor of ships in motion is mirrored in Sharpe's "wake work," the disruption left behind the path of a ship, and the labor of living and practicing care for one another in spite of living in an anti-Black world. Sharpe writes: "We are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected" (2016, 22). This framing by both Sharpe and Gilroy, of Black people as a people without citizenship, makes our claiming ownership of Black Twitter—a heterogenous collective with multiple subcommunities that joins under one banner—all the more potent.

Digital migration mirrors the cycles of transformation and inconstancy in Black physical migration. Social network sites are particularly suited to accommodate Blackness because, as Parham argues,

> Black diasporic existence is a digitizing experience. Transfer, migration, metonymy: The break and the remix persist as both witness and feature of the multiple and continual experiences of forced migration endemic to Afro-diasporic life in the Americas—the Middle Passage, the auction block, the Great Migration—"the digital" (2019, 104).

The white Western legal and social forces that dictate Black geographical migration has its analog in the contemporary movement of Black people between platforms: Digital fiefdoms owned by a small number of white technology magnates are varyingly hospitable to Black produsers (Bruns 2008). The push and pull factors of digital migration also shares commonalities with offline migration, as Black users flee from digital harms; seek and follow Black community; and adapt the landscape and culture of the spaces they settle.

Black Digital Transmigration as a Transgressive Space-making Practice

A feeling of ownership comes not from involvement in platform design, having financial stakes in a technological company, or a formal intellectual ownership claim to the design of the platform, but instead through an understanding of the nontraditional racialized and feminized labor of platform building (Nakamura, forthcoming) that allows Black users to transform Twitter from its default setting—one that is geared toward the usage of the dominant and therefore unmarked cisgender, heterosexual male, white users—to one that is supportive of Black life.

The choice of which users are at the center of design is a political one, and there is a bias toward the dominant group, a "relatively small, but potentially highly profitable, subset of humanity."

White men disproportionally influence technology design, and thereby maintain and reproduce white Western cultural supremacy in its content (Brock 2011, 1088), centering and prioritizing white cisheteroparchiarchal norms as those of the "ideal user" centered in the design process (Costanza-Chock 2020, 74; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003). The choice of which users are at the center of design is a political one, and there is a bias toward the dominant group, a "relatively small, but potentially highly profitable, subset of humanity" (Costanza-Chock 2020, 77).

In practice, users are agents of technological change (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003) alongside platform designers, and co-constructed innovations between Twitter as a platform and its users have contributed to Black Twitter in its current iteration. For example, user innovation of the @, #, and RT functions (Seward 2013), which were subsequently formally added to the platform, turned Twitter from a space for individualized status updates to a space for discourse**.** These typographic symbols foster ties between both discursive threads and between users by collating conversations and allowing users to coalesce around particular instances. This is an example of how an affordance, implemented by users, is taken up in the design process and becomes a key feature of that technology.



Black Lives Matter protest in Rome, 2020. Photo source: Alessandra Notaro/Wikimedia Commons.

This discursive turn, in particular, is key to Twitter's relevancy to Black users as it signals a shift in the dominant function of the platform into a facilitator of networked discourse—an interdiscourse web in miniature—which was then taken up to great effect by Black users, as a method of connecting a dispersed Black community. This demonstrates how Twitter as a platform and Black Twitter are mutually shaping. Twitter's affordances that were easily adapted to Black discursive rituals, such as signifying (Brock 2012; Florini 2014), also occur alongside active *reconceptualization* of Twitter's use in ways that are transgressive to its designed and dominant function (Fouché 2006, 642). This ranges from the generative (Bailey 2021)—undercutting white cyberculture by creating and disseminating digital media that is in opposition to dominant, anti-Black ideologies (Steele 2021, 51; Gray-Denson 2015, 182) to the defensive (Bailey 2021)—fostering resistance movements (Green-Hayes and James 2017), performing "killjoy" work (Ahmed 2010), and clapping back at those who cause harm (Clark 2020). Returning to Twitter's hashtag function, in addition to organizing discourse, Black Twitter users took up the hashtag as a means of recoding media with Black presence by "using pro-Black technological and philosophical terminologies to hack anti-Black, Western, white supremacist binaries" (Green-Hayes and James 2017, 68). In the case of #BlackLivesMatter, Black users negotiated Twitter as a counterpublic space (Squires 2002) through the hypervisible hashtags, and used them as a platform from which to globally mobilize against racial subjection, an example of tailoring social media's functions and capabilities to (Black) user needs (Fouché 2006; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003; Bailey 2021).

The discourse collective of Black Twitter hosts conversation from the political to the joyful; often simultaneously. This satellite public takes up space on Twitter in plain sight and defiance of the dominant public, retaining a separate and distinct identity as a *Black* space while still engaging in wider public

discourses from time to time (Squires 2002, 448). The transformation of white space into Black space is a claim to ownership: Twitter, or at least the most visible and productive corner of it, *belongs* to Black Twitter, a reputational transmigration into a space acknowledged as culturally Black by both in and out-group users.

Platform Decline

Platform migration studies can help us understand the patterns that precede the collapse of a social network (Kumar, Zafarani, and Liu 2011; Lörincz et al. 2019; Török and Kertész 2017). Granovetter (1973) introduces strong and weak tie theory as a model for collective behavior in information diffusion, where "the strength of the tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (1361). Lörincz et al. use "bridges" and "bonds" in much the same way, where a bridge is synonymous with the "weak tie"—relationships built on "access to information, resources and opportunities through social ties" (2019, 44)—and the "bond" is a "strong tie," stronger relationships built on "trust, intimacy, and cooperation in dense, close, and stronger relationships" (Lörincz et al., 44). As stronger ties/bonds may interact in offline contexts, it is the parasocial, weak ties that keep users on platforms, tempering the desire to migrate away from a digital space and lose access to a wide network.

High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) (Kumar, Zafarani, and Liu 2011) are those with high social capital and numerous weak tie bonds who are deemed important to the development and growth of a site. Kumar, Zafarani, and Liu observed that these users and their migration patterns are a microcosm for general patterns of site migration, as they initiate "herd effects" when users follow their movement to competing platforms. Black Twitter as a discourse collective is an example of numerous weak ties exerting a strong pull to a space—a collective cohesive enough to name itself, but not enough so to have clearly defined relationships beyond its digital home.

> *The interlinkage of Twitter with other platforms due to interdiscourse webs means it is difficult for users to divest entirely.*

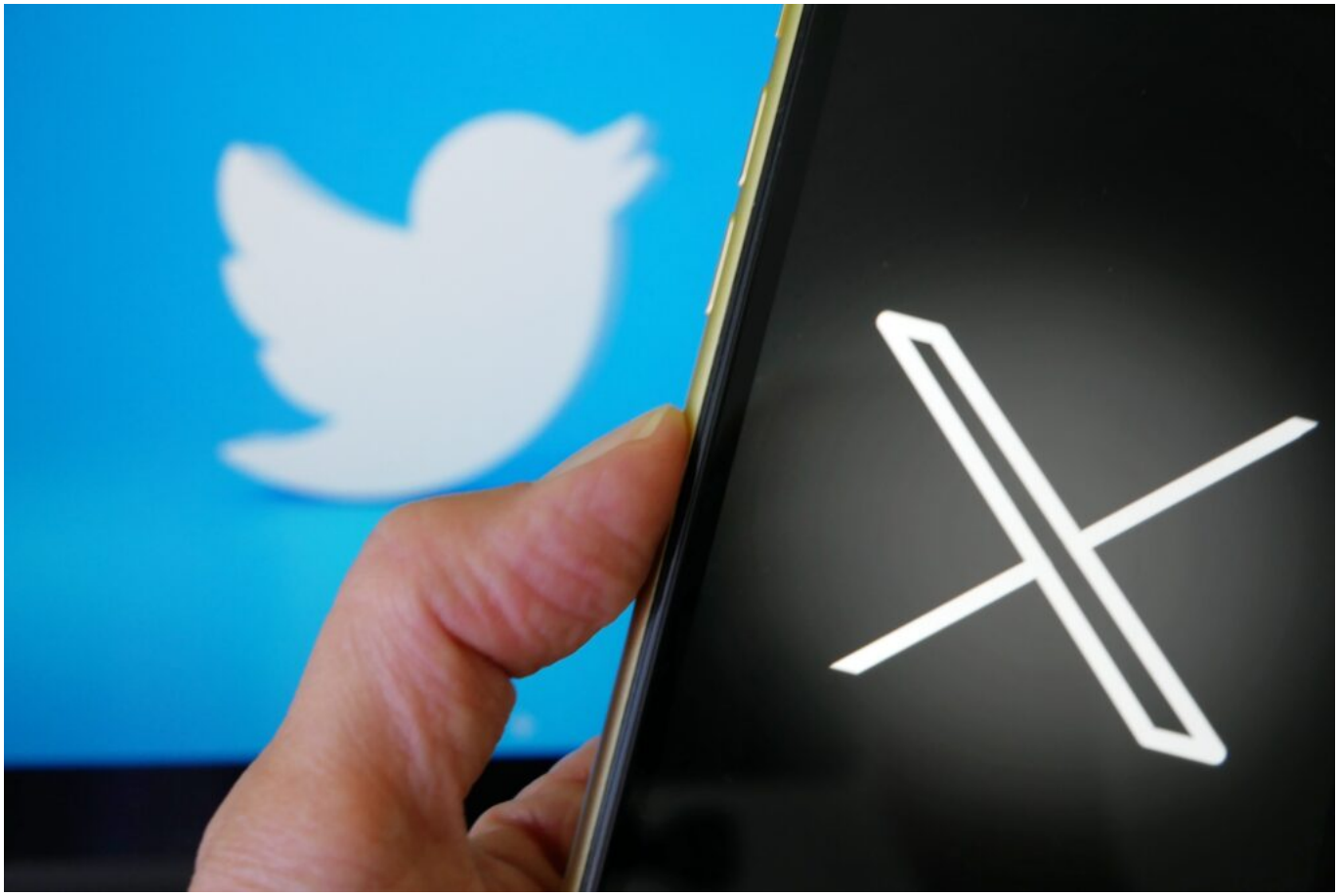
Platform collapse, as defined by Lörincz et al., may not be marked by profile deletion, but instead by increased oscillation to competing sites, with users creating additional profiles elsewhere, leading to a gradual reduction in usage of the declining network (2019, 51). It is rare for a platform to see total abandonment, and I am not implying that Twitter is on the cusp of this moment of collapse, particularly as Twitter's value to Black users is its position at the center of the hypernarrative web—as a platform to oscillate to/away from but always *return* to—precludes its total abandonment. Being a central part of a multiplatform ecosystem, with information flowing both toward and away from the site, is a sign of relevance. However, that same connectivity also may obscure platform decline. The interlinkage of Twitter with other platforms due to interdiscourse webs means it is difficult for users to divest entirely.

Multiple push and pull factors are influencing the possibility of migration away from Twitter. Since

Musk's takeover of Twitter, structural changes have been met with extensive disapproval. The platform itself seems to be degrading in quality, from widespread outages, resulting from the loss of the majority of the engineering workforce (Masnick 2023), and affordance changes, such as the introduction of the Twitter Blue paid verification feature and removal of legacy verified checkmarks, eroding the reputation of the Blue check. The Blue check is no longer representative of notable public figures or verified representatives of an institution, but instead is available to anyone willing to spend $8 per month. In addition, changes to the algorithm reduces the visibility of those without Blue checks, rewarding those who pay for Twitter's services with greater engagement (Narayanan 2023), and limiting the spread of interdiscourses.

If Twitter's value to Black users was the ability to have discourse with other members of that homophilic community—i.e., via multiple weak ties then this is a significant derailment of Twitter's dominant function. The changes to Twitter's technical characteristics are in this case limiting the "extent to which it can be socially shaped" or flexibly interpreted (Doherty, Coombs, and Loan-Clarke 2006, 570), and potentially increasing the number of former users who are leaving due to the introduction of cost to access formerly free affordances and an accompanying degradation of services (Wyatt 2003, 74).

In addition to the degradation of Twitter's internal connectivity, its position of primacy in the hypernarrative platform ecology was challenged when in December 2022 Twitter policy changed to prohibit free promotion of third-party social media platforms, disallowing linking to other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Mastodon. Though this decision was reversed within hours, it was indicative of a shift, a disconnection from the broader ecology of platforms. This negatively affects Twitter's value, since by penalizing connections to other platforms and removing itself from the hypernarrative web, Twitter content becomes incompatible with the leaky discourse privileged by Black users (Lockett 2021).



Similarly, on July 1, 2023, a rate limit was (temporarily, thankfully) introduced capping the number of tweets a user can see daily. This allowed Twitter Blue subscribers to see 6,000 tweets per day, with unverified accounts limited to 600 tweets per day, and new unverified accounts capped at 300 daily tweets, after which point users were unable to tweet, view tweets, or even send direct messages. These factors drastically limited the function of the site. Since a key draw for Black Twitter in the first place is the potential for hypernarrativity and the spread of discourse, the replacement of social capital earned honestly through wit, speed, and relevancy to a pay-to-play structure makes the site less valuable. If Black Twitter is a discourse collective and Twitter is limiting the ability for discourse to spread, then Twitter is no longer a place for Black Twitter.

The siloing of discourse limits the potential for engagement and social capital. Twitter once prided itself on its reputation for immediacy, for speed of connection, and reach. Audiovisual content, for instance, from spaces like TikTok or Instagram, has a discursive element added on Twitter—Black people comment on this content and transform it into more than the sum of its parts. Limiting the ability for content production leaves Twitter less valuable as a space to comment on culture, voluntarily ceding this central position in the hypernarrative web and leaving a vacuum of power. With no viable replacement service, Black and non-Black users alike continue to work within the existing ecology supported by Twitter as a platform. At this juncture, the question arises of *how* Black Twitter users will continue to use the space going forward—will we see a change in practice?

Sally Wyatt conceptualizes internet usage along a continuum—acknowledging the possibility of variance in degrees and forms of participation (Wyatt 2003, 77). If we are referring to Black Twitter users as a

homogenous group, we could argue that the *way* Black Twitter engages with the platform may undergo a shift in degree and type of participation. As Twitter retains its reputation for immediacy, it is still a place that Black users gravitate back to for temporally bounded events, as a location to participate live in Black discursive rituals, such as livetweeting during Usher's Superbowl halftime show or the Africa Cup of Nations (#AFCON) finals. Are users who would have once been active posters turning to lurking or to using Twitter's competitors when not participating in these live events?

Conclusion

I return to where I began: the indeterminacy of Black Twitter's future. While Twitter's web traffic has decreased by 14 percent between 2022–2023, it remains the third most used social network globally, behind Facebook and Instagram (Adarlo 2023). Usage patterns by power users (or HNWIs) remains largely unchanged (Perez 2023), perhaps because larger personal networks and/or adoption of Twitter Blue mitigates the impacts of overall declining connectivity. Perez (2023) connects Twitter's slight decline in accounts with the reduction in new users joining the service, potentially due to the loss of the recognizable Twitter brand name and bird icon from app stores following its rebrand to "X."

The continued adaptation of Twitter's design encourages ongoing interpretive flexibility. As there will be no stable, finalized end-product, Twitter continues to be reconfigured anew by its constituents as new features are introduced to match the needs of its users, and Black Twitter users' historic propensity for adaptation bodes well for an eventual reconfiguration of "X." In terms of my migration metaphors, the prospect of adaptation and return might mirror the "new great migration," the movement of Black Americans *back* to the American South driven by established kinship networks and being magnetized to spaces that are (perceived or otherwise) Black (Frey 2022).

Black community practice is tied to discursive potential, and those practices can be and are transplanted to different platforms in the social media ecosystem.

Our capacity for transmigration also carries the potential for transformation of a rival service: The hypertextuality of interdiscourses means that the cultural practices instituted on Twitter circulate to other sites. The reinterpretation of TikTok, for example, as a platform with a capacity for discourse can be seen in Black content creators making multipart "story time" narratives with discussion in the comment threads, stitching or duetting existing TikToks as a way of responding to or remixing content, or even posting slideshows of written content. Black community practice is tied to discursive potential, and those practices can be and are transplanted to different platforms in the social media ecosystem.

In asking how Black Twitter might migrate as a collective, I neglect the variance in usage shifts between the multiply sited Black Twitter*s*, the subcommunities that make up the collective. This field review does not address the Black non-user, that has never used Twitter, and more work is needed in future on the former user—to establish the tipping points that changed their interpretation of Twitter from a space for

active discourse to passive, occasional, or total non-participation.

Recommended Readings

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