
Twitter's Remarkable Mission in a Divided World



By Theodoros Evgeniou and Ludo Van der Heyden , INSEAD

Good governance is key to ensure that exceptional people, organisations and countries realise their full potential.

While the world continues to hotly debate climate change, there's another change that should be on our radar: a "societal climate change" fuelled by people and technologies, mainly the internet and artificial intelligence (AI) that can spin truth from fiction and erode trust in each other as well as our political institutions.

What if a global **"digital town square"**, as Elon Musk calls Twitter, divides us further and erodes civilisation towards its demise? To liberally **paraphrase** the Chief Twit: It no longer matters whether our existence is threatened by climate change if civilisation has already collapsed.

A collapse may happen, not because of AI killer machines or another bad tech as many fear, but because people are losing sight of reality. In a virtual world, haphazardly run by both humans and AI algorithms – **now also ChatGPT** – creating filters, people can turn against each other and destroy the common good –us all. As Musk concluded, **"Human consciousness is**

[then] gone”.

Musk may be terrifyingly right about the existential risks arising from technologies. People now question whether we can afford to put such a responsibility in the hands of a single company or any single person. However, the more pertinent question is: Regardless of ownership, how can we *collectively* govern this risk?

While we watch corporate change unfold at Twitter with Musk moving at dizzying speed, our polarised world is regrettably taking sides for or against the new and old Twitter. Both sides miss the point, not only about what’s at stake, but that governance done right matters more than most people imagine, irrespective of ownership.

Extraordinary challenges require good governance at different levels – corporate and government, national, and international. This is necessary to ensure success for every individual, company and country is sustainable. Both the old and the new Twitter, and governments, have so far failed at this; the point has been buried in a debate overtaken by emotions.

Sadly, poor governance is the reason why we collectively fail to ensure that remarkable people, organisations and countries (the US, Russia China, and all others) realise their full potential – to imagine and build a better world. But what does good corporate governance look like in the face of new existential risks?

Saving the world’s town square?

Musk should be commended for correctly assessing the huge societal risks that can arise from platforms like Twitter. Purchasing and delisting Twitter allows him to govern without attacks from parties such as minority shareholders arguing that his risky and sometimes reckless experiments hurt their interests, the corporation and Twitter’s share price. Twitter’s Musk does not have to face the same shareholder challenges as Tesla’s Musk. Privatisation is often an effective way for a company in turmoil to realise its noble purpose, particularly in a divided country with divided shareholders. There's always the possibility to go public again.

Musk now faces arguably his greatest test ever: Can he lower the societal climate temperature to a healthy level, bring together a divided world, ensure freedom of expression and safety for all, save democracy and

strengthen global peace through more meaningful conversations?

Musk's challenge is ours. It is futile and even harmful to split into pro and anti-new Twitter or Musk camps. With so much at stake, we need to ask: What support does Twitter – and its owner, whoever that may be – need to succeed in an endeavour that affects us all?

Musk on a Twitter mission impossible?

Musk is arguably one of the greatest entrepreneurs of our time, having pioneered electric vehicles, privatised spacecraft for NASA and outpaced all governments and businesses to connect Ukrainians with Starlink, his satellite internet service. Twitter, too, is a remarkable organisation trying to **"strengthen our communities through our platform, people, and profits."** The mission is laudable, but executing it well may prove illusory and executing it poorly will lead to undesirable outcomes.

One month after becoming Chief Twit, Musk delivered on his promise of reinstating previously banned individuals – Trump included, after an **open poll**. He also demonstrated his commitment to “full transparency” by publishing the now notorious **Twitter Files**: internal communications highlighting the firm's previous processes and challenges in making major decisions with severe socio-political impact.

Musk's transparency is hailed by many. While we of course support transparency, it alone does not equate to good governance; it may not even be desirable if poorly managed. Indeed, the Twitter Files have raised the social temperature, pointing not only to the potential perils of transparency without strong processes – a key feature of good governance – but also the difficult questions companies like Twitter face. Whether the files succeed in supporting Twitter's mission remains to be seen.

Corporate governance failures at the new and old Twitter

A laudable mission requires an equally laudable corporate governance that takes responsibility for executing it and is accountable to all stakeholders. Moreover, the key lesson often missed is that getting governance right is a constant work in progress involving continuous conversations, feedback, learning and refinement. The legislative and regulatory changes implemented by banks following the 2008 financial crisis clearly demonstrated this.

Major corporate disasters – such as Theranos and FTX – also remind us how **“simple” lessons are often missed**. For example, it is well established that responsibility needs to be placed with a group of people – the corporate board of directors – and not any single person. This generally leads to better outcomes, although there can be rare, and typically short-term exceptions. However, the group needs to perform as part of the “Governance Tripod” that includes owners, directors, and management.

Unfortunately, the Tripod isn’t always effective. For example, the chair and the board of the old Twitter could have done more to explain to all stakeholders, Musk, Democrats, Trump supporters and the entire US public that the responsibility for Twitter lay with its board, including overseeing and possibly managing the impact of major decisions from the Trust & Safety Council and the Legal and Policy teams. Society demands a responsible Twitter that doesn’t take sides, but instead, unites the world by involving all sides, however divided. Perhaps most importantly, Twitter needs to continuously remind those that disagree with its decisions that it is ready to listen and engage, with the commitment to improve in line with its mission and values. Good governance requires an open mindset and is a continuous conversation – with all stakeholders.

Twitter’s leadership also needed, and still needs, stronger and more active governance to support, empower and leverage its potential. The information in the Twitter Files shows the seriousness with which management tried to deal with complex issues under difficult circumstances. They also point to significant decisions taken by the Trust & Safety Council together with Legal and Policy, without the knowledge of the CEO, let alone the board. It might be a reasonable policy not to involve the CEO to shield this person from outside pressure. The board – perhaps with the support of another “Trust & Safety Board” including representatives from opposing stakeholders sides and civil society – could review the policies and processes leading to major and possibly systemic decisions such as Trump’s dismissal. Ultimately the board bears the responsibility and accountability for the company and how it carries out its mission, and should bear the brunt of the pressure.

Governance at the new Twitter hardly seems to be better. To begin with, Musk has become a single owner, chair and CEO, allowing him to appoint himself as the sole board member with nearly unlimited power. Musk has done away not just with a central Trust & Safety Council, but more importantly with an independent Board of Directors. While power-of-one can

work for some time, it is a risky proposition – not only for Twitter, but also for Musk and society because of Twitter’s systemic externalities. Given what is at stake, we may not wish to take this risk. When it comes to executing its mission, the decision-making processes at the new Twitter seem far from **fair process practice**, which could hurt its corporate standing.

Those who support the new Twitter applaud the innovative and transparent approach of “going direct” to people. Few would argue that major decisions, such as the appointment of a company’s CEO, be taken through a **public poll** without deep knowledge of the role’s responsibilities, the market landscape or the capabilities of the candidates. These are decisions for the board, and in this case Musk as chair, not as CEO or owner.

What next for Twitter and the global virtual world?

Musk is in a precarious position. He bought Twitter to make it stronger but now risks making both himself and the company weaker, possibly bankrupt. Good governance would protect and strengthen Musk and Twitter. It requires Musk (as owner) to possibly replace Musk as chair and install and monitor a new board.

More critically when it comes to corporate missions linked to existential risks and global technologies like the internet, corporate governance is not enough. The need for regulations, government and international governance bodies is critical. Only strong governance at the corporate, government and global level can leverage remarkable entrepreneurs like Musk, and make remarkable missions like Twitter’s a success. However, when national and global governance are ineffective, corporate governance shoulders an even bigger burden and needs to lead the way.

Interestingly, Musk’s initial response to EU Commissioner Thierry Breton has been positive, **asserting that Twitter will abide by the Digital Services Act**. It represents a powerful endorsement of a European regulation by a powerful US technopreneur and proves that the two may co-exist and even agree.

We cannot afford to let exceptional people and organisations pursuing critical missions fail. We certainly should not miss the extraordinary opportunities created by **good tech**, which cannot be dissociated from good governance.

Instead of fighting and dividing further, let's unite and fix this agenda – and ensure civilisation does not fall off the cliff.

This is the second article in our series on 'Good Tech'. [Read the first article on how to develop and implement Good Tech.](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/operations/twitters-remarkable-mission-divided-world>

About the author(s)

Theodoros Evgeniou is a Professor of Decision Sciences and Technology Management at INSEAD. He has been working on machine learning and AI for over 25 years.

Ludo Van der Heyden is the INSEAD Chaired Professor of Corporate Governance and Emeritus Professor of Technology and Operations Management. He is the founder of the INSEAD Corporate Governance Centre.