

Social Media Stampedes: How Mass User Exit Reshapes the Digital Landscape

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According to the Pew Research Center, at least half of U.S. adults rely on social media for information about current events. But what happens when they leave those platforms behind?

In this conversation with MediaWell, media scholar Margaret Yee Man Ng explores the phenomenon of “social media stampedes” — cases of mass user exodus from a specific platform, often in response to sudden or controversial policy changes. Drawing on her own research, Dr. Ng discusses previous stampedes, the (un)successful migration to alternative sites, and the long-term implications for trusted digital information networks.

Can you tell us about a case of a “social media migration” from one platform to another? What triggered it?

A compelling case of social media migration occurred after Elon Musk’s acquisition of Twitter — now rebranded as X — in late 2022. [My recent research](#) highlights how this event catalyzed significant user discontent, driven largely by abrupt platform changes. For instance, relaxed content moderation policies under Musk’s leadership led to spikes in misinformation and hate speech against journalists and marginalized communities. At the same time, the removal of “legacy” verification badges undermined trust in authoritative accounts, while algorithmic shifts prioritizing paid content frustrated users accustomed to organic engagement.

Despite this dissatisfaction, migration to alternative platforms like Mastodon, Meta’s Threads, and Bluesky unfolded gradually. Initial analyses revealed no immediate mass exodus post-acquisition. My findings indicate that only 5.7% of journalists had removed or made their accounts private since October 2022. [Other studies](#) corroborated this trend, showing fewer than 10 account deactivations among 4,000 tracked journalists from 19 U.S. news outlets in the first three months. However, a modest 3% decline in posting activity within six months suggested users were cautiously exploring alternatives rather than fully

abandoning Twitter—a pattern consistent with historical platform migrations.

Interviews I conducted with journalists underscored key push factors, including disputes over content moderation (particularly Musk’s perceived amplification of harmful speech), the destabilizing loss of verification, and algorithmic prioritization of monetization over user experience. Conversely, pull factors attracting users to alternatives included decentralized governance models, such as Mastodon’s user-controlled communities, and niche, curated spaces like Bluesky’s invite-only environment, which emphasized intentional interaction.

This case underscores the profound influence of platform governance on user trust and behavior — a central theme in my broader work examining the dynamics of digital ecosystems.

When people leave a specific platform, what happens to their trusted information networks? Are users following them to a new platform, or leaving them behind?

When users leave a platform, their trusted information networks often fragment — a phenomenon shaped by the mechanics and motivations behind their migration. Consider [the case of journalists migrating to Mastodon](#) following Twitter’s policy shifts: while these users aimed to rebuild their networks, my research reveals that only about 21% of journalists posted more frequently on Mastodon in the first six months, with the majority remaining more active on Twitter. This underscores a critical challenge—network transfer is rarely seamless, even when migration occurs.

Several factors drive this dynamic. First, the strength of social ties plays a role: close professional or personal connections (strong ties), such as research teams or activist groups, often migrate collectively to preserve collaboration, while weaker ties — casual followers or interest-based communities — are frequently abandoned, narrowing access to diverse perspectives. Second, technical barriers like platform interoperability influence outcomes. Mastodon’s decentralized design, though empowering, created friction in porting existing follower networks compared to centralized alternatives like Threads, slowing network reconstruction. Finally, hybrid platform presence complicates cohesion: many professionals, including journalists, straddle old and new platforms, maintaining Twitter for work outreach while using Mastodon for personal engagement, thereby dividing attention and diluting network unity.

Ultimately, migration does not just relocate networks — it transforms them. Lost weak ties can stifle serendipitous information flow, and homogeneous communities risk fostering insular discourse. This duality highlights how platform transitions reshape not just where

we connect, but *how* we engage with information and communities.

Social media is often linked to a rise in the fragmentation and polarization of the broader media environment — and, at the same time, major platforms can provide a focal point for shared conversation. How do shifts in platform use interact with these trends?

The relationship between social media fragmentation and shared conversations is quite paradoxical. On one hand, platforms bring people together around common topics, but on the other, when users move to spaces that only reflect their own beliefs, it deepens. For example, Truth Social, which former President Trump joined after his Twitter ban, became a mostly conservative community with [over 3 million users by 2024](#), creating an echo chamber where opposing views are rare. This kind of segregation tends to increase polarization because users see less diversity of opinion and more questionable content. Even though Trump's many posts on Truth Social only led to a small increase in users, the platform's strong partisan content often influences broader conversations and fuels societal divides.

At the same time, the story is different depending on the region. [In Taiwan, Threads became a popular place for political discussion](#) during the 2024 elections because it offered a bot-free space and was connected to Instagram, which users appreciated for political freedom. But in the U.S., Threads did not catch on as much because X still dominates the culture here. This shows how local politics and existing platforms shape where people go online.

While platforms like Threads in Taiwan show social media can encourage healthy civic engagement, the bigger trend toward echo chambers risks making divisions worse. [Meta's choice to reduce political content on Threads](#) highlights the challenge of balancing open discussion with responsible platform management. Moving forward, social media will have to find ways to reduce polarization while still providing spaces for shared conversations, which is not easy given algorithms and global politics.

What happens when people and communities leave social media altogether? Do they become disengaged or disconnected from the news itself, or simply more targeted? How do they rebuild their information networks in a post-social media landscape?

When people leave social media, their connection to news does not disappear — it shifts. First, not all departures are permanent. Many users become “intermittent discontinuers,”

taking planned breaks or reducing engagement, while others leave for good (“permanent discontinuers”). [Intermittent discontinuers often return](#) when they feel the need for social connection, professional updates, or breaking news-sometimes triggered by major events or peer influence. For example, after Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter, many journalists announced their move to Mastodon, but [most did not fully abandon Twitter](#), instead maintaining a presence on both platforms or returning when professional needs arose.

Leaving social media does not always mean disengagement from news, but it does disrupt habitual news consumption. Some people [report feeling less informed about current events](#) after quitting Facebook, as social media is a key news source for many. However, they also experience [benefits like reduced anxiety and improved well-being](#). Many former users seek alternative ways to stay informed, such as subscribing to newsletters, using messaging apps, or visiting news websites directly.

Communities that leave social media often rebuild their information networks through more private or targeted channels. For journalists and activists, direct engagement tools like newsletters or alternative platforms (e.g., Mastodon or Threads) are increasingly important for maintaining audience connections and mobilizing support.

I think leaving social media typically leads to a period of adjustment, with some loss of incidental news exposure but also opportunities to reshape information habits. The process is rarely absolute: people cycle between platforms, experiment with alternatives, and often return if their social or informational needs are unmet. The key is that information networks do not disappear — they adapt, becoming more intentional and sometimes more fragmented, but also potentially more resilient and trustworthy.

[**Read more about Dr. Ng’s research here.**](#)
