

Twitter had a new plan to fight extremism — then Elon arrived | The Verge

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It had been a long pandemic for Twitter's research team. Tasked with solving some of the platform's toughest problems around harassment, extremism, and disinformation, staffers absconded to Napa Valley in November 2021 for a company retreat. Despite a tumultuous change in leadership — Jack Dorsey had recently stepped down, appointing former chief technology officer Parag Agrawal to take his place — the group felt unified, even hopeful. After months of fighting bad actors online, employees took a moment to unwind. "We finally felt like we had a cohesive team," one researcher says.

But at the goodbye brunch on the last day, people's phones started pinging with alarming news: their boss, Dantley Davis, Twitter's vice president of design, had been fired. Nobody knew it was coming. "It was like a movie," says one attendee, who asked to remain anonymous because they are not authorized to speak publicly about the company. "People started crying. I was just sitting there eating a croissant being like, 'What's up with the mood?'"

The news foreshadowed a downward spiral for the research organization. Although the group was used to reorganizations, a shakeup in the middle of an outing meant to bond the team together felt deeply symbolic.

The turmoil came to a head in April, when Elon Musk signed a deal to buy Twitter. Interviews with current and former employees, along with 70 pages of internal documents, suggest the chaos surrounding Musk's acquisition pushed some teams to the breaking point, prompting numerous health researchers to quit, with some saying their colleagues were told to deprioritize projects to fight extremism in favor of focusing on bots and spam. The Musk deal might not even go through, but the effects on Twitter's health efforts are already clear.

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