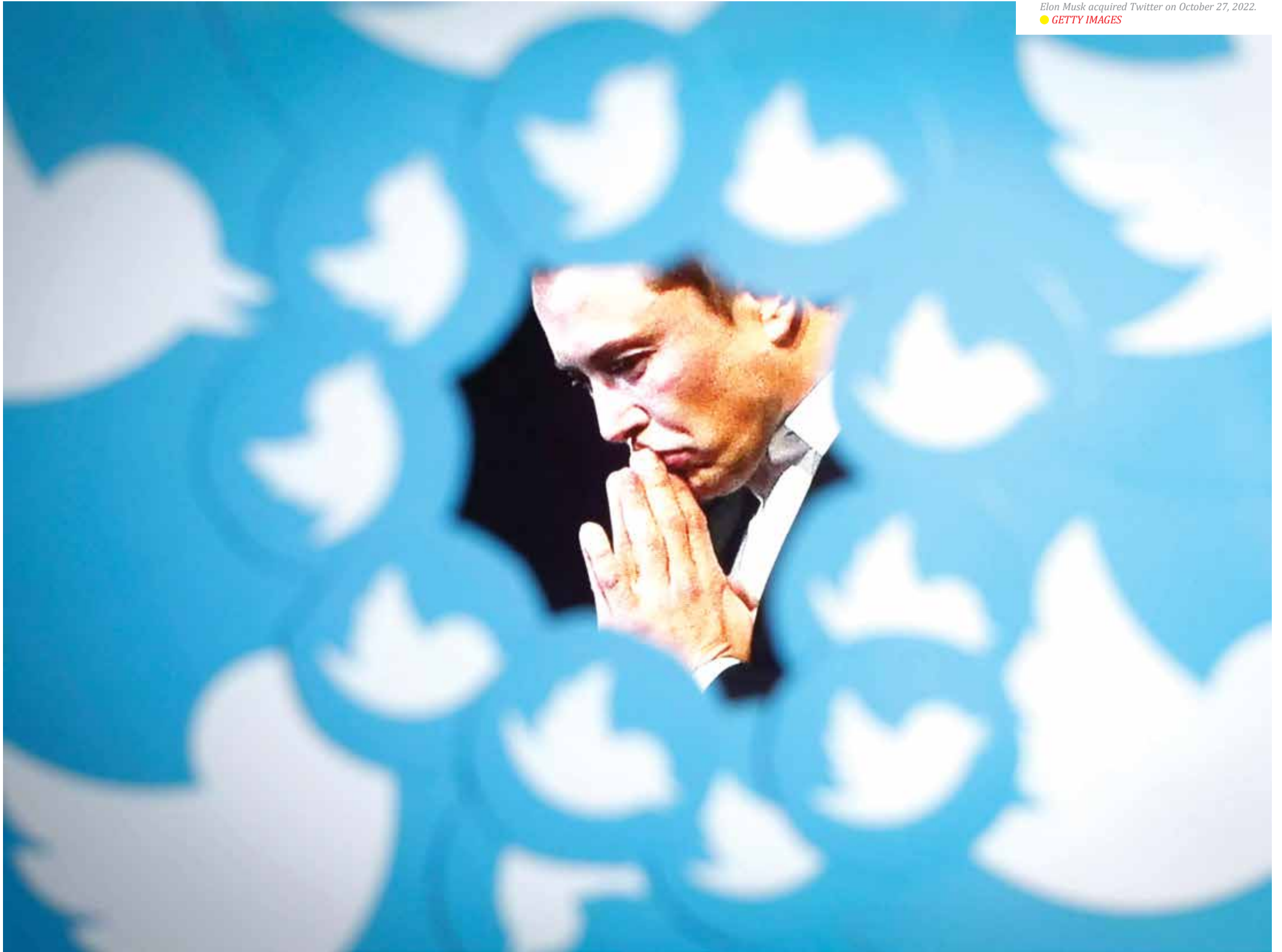


Elon Musk acquired Twitter on October 27, 2022.
● GETTY IMAGES



Georgia Institute of Technology scholar Amy S. Bruckman: Death of Twitter is a positive step towards improving our information space

2
PART

EXCLUSIVE



Amy S. Bruckman is a professor in the School of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and author of 'Should You Believe Wikipedia?: Online Communities and the Construction of Knowledge', published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

Let's talk about the next part of your book. Why and in what ways do you think the Internet has changed the way we think?

Well, the fundamental ways that knowledge is formed are different now. It's interesting to think about the fact that echo chambers are not always bad. The example I use in my class is from back in the Usenet days. There were two newsgroups about feminism. One of them moderated and one of them unmoderated. The moderated feminism newsgroup declared that you must accept the principles of feminism to post here, and anything that contradicts them will be deleted. The unmoderated one said you can write whatever you want.

In the moderated group, we would start with principles like everyone deserves equal rights regardless of

their gender and then, we could have a good conversation about what comes next once you accept those facts. The unmoderated group was more like 4chan. It was a flame fest, where you couldn't have any conversations of a serious nature. The moderate newsgroup was an echo chamber since you had to agree to a certain ideology to participate. A lot of times echo chambers are bad, but they can be good if it's a group of people starting from correct assumptions. An example of a bad echo chamber would be the one reflected in a paper that my student, Sijia Xiao, and I did. We studied people who believe in the "chemtrail conspiracy," which is the idea that the condensation trails visible behind airplanes are deliberately sprayed for evil purposes. If you get a group of people together

to say, "We believe people should be treated equally, now let's talk about what comes next," that's good. If you get a group of people together to say, "Chemtrails are destroying the world, now what's next?" that's bad. But this ability to form groups that have strong sets of shared assumptions is really novel.

Maybe the Internet facilitated it to an extent that was not possible before, but we had the same phenomena before on a smaller scale. Oh, of course. Absolutely.

So, are we seeing more conspiracy theories emerge because of the Internet? People have always believed in crazy things. There's an empirical question of whether more people believe in more crazy things than used to happen.

I don't have the data to answer that. It's certainly the case that the speed with which a non-standard belief can spread has increased. You could look at, for example, the QAnon conspiracy. It was created relatively quickly and spread to a relatively large number of people. The Internet absolutely played a role in that. But, of course, people believing in crazy things is as old as time.

Is it incidental that we are in — according to some scholars, at least — a post-truth society that also emerged after the invention of the Internet?

Well, I don't know what you mean when you say we're in a post-truth society. There's a lot of truth everywhere and there's a lot of craziness everywhere. Are there more non-standard beliefs than there used to be? I don't know. If you look

back a few hundred years, lots of people believed all kinds of things that are objectively wrong. If you look at 18th-century medicine, it's all insane. Are we more insane than we used to be? I don't know. How do we measure? You have to define your constructs.

So, you do not buy into the whole concept of a post-truth society. Is that correct?

I do think we have some problems with our current information space that could be significantly improved. And I do think that the death of Twitter, as it is currently unfolding, is a very positive step towards improving our information space. One of the things I argue in my book is that a for-profit company can never do the right thing for individuals or communities. When Twitter is driv-

en by capitalist priorities and the desire to have good quarterly earnings above the needs of individuals or communities. It can never do the right thing for people.

There are a lot of people moving to the nonprofit platform Mastodon as a result of the Twitter controversy. I hope we look back on this moment as one where nonprofit social media gained a real foothold with real people. Now, the fact that my academic friends are all using it doesn't mean it's going to catch on more broadly. There are also some problems with Mastodon and the fediverse that still need solving. There's no question about that. But I think there's enough potential that we'll look back on this moment as an important one where things began changing for the better.