

More women and gay men under attack after Twitter rebrand

Elon Musk's recent takeover of Twitter, now rebranded as X, has led to a significant increase in online threats faced by marginalized groups. The removal of the block feature, a decision made by Musk, has had particularly severe repercussions for gay men and Black women, who have seen a substantial surge in targeted slurs.



According to recent studies, slurs against Black women have tripled from an average of 1,282 per day to nearly 4,000 following the elimination of the blocking feature. Similarly, slurs against gay men have seen a significant increase from 2,500 per day to almost 4,000 per day.

Musk's decision to also remove the option for users to report misinformation has raised concerns, particularly within the European Union where the Digital Service Act outlines specific regulations. Despite these concerns, Musk appears to be prioritising his belief in freedom of speech over potential risks.



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Christia Spears Brown 30 Oct 2023



According to Anna Collard, the senior vice president of Content Strategy & Evangelist at KnowBe4 Africa, these changes effectively strip away the defence mechanisms that users rely on to protect themselves from online threats and abuse. With no block feature and no means to report misinformation, individuals are left exposed and vulnerable in the digital realm.

Muting only shields users

"The mute function that replaced the blocking function only stops notifications about an account's posts," she explains. "However, it does not prevent the harasser from viewing, commenting on, or replying to a person's posts. Essentially, muting only shields users from seeing certain content without putting a complete stop to it. If you are getting death threats, all the mute function does is prevent you from knowing you got a death threat."

Another concern is the status of previously blocked accounts. It remains unclear whether they will automatically become unblocked. Blocking offered far better protection as it cut communication between the person under attack and the person attacking them.

The latter cannot comment, follow, post or repost anything once they are blocked. However, the feature strips this defence mechanism away, leaving every online action of the targeted individual visible to attackers and harassers.

“The concern arises primarily for female users in the public domain, including politicians, journalists, and celebrities,” says Collard. “These individuals are increasingly vulnerable to harassment. Furthermore, women of colour face an even greater risk of online harassment, amplifying the overall threat to their online presence.”

Hate speech has risen alarmingly

Instances of hate speech, racism, misogyny, and homophobic content have shot up at an “alarming” rate, says researchers. Violence against women, both offline and online, manifests in several ways, including cyber-harassment, revenge porn, rape threats, and even as far as sexual assault and murder threats. Perpetrators can be a range of individuals, including partners, ex-partners, colleagues, schoolmates, and frequently, anonymous individuals.

“Certain groups of women, including women’s rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, gamers, public figures, and politicians, are particularly exposed. A lack of protection may impede their ability to express themselves equally, freely, and without fear,” says Collard.

“The impact of cyberviolence on women is disproportionate, leading to psychological distress and suffering, ultimately discouraging their active participation in digital platforms for political, social, and cultural engagement.”

Other platforms are doing it better

Platforms such as Apple and Google have incorporated terms and conditions requiring social networking apps to have a block feature or the ability to block abusive users in order to be available on their stores.

Whether or not Musk will go head-to-head with tech giants is uncertain as there has been little discussion on the next steps since the shocking announcement in August 2023.

Nevertheless, it is crucial that users of the social platform recognise that these risks are now inherent in its use and that they need to be careful moving forward. The evolution of the mute/block feature within X is yet to be revealed, but one thing is clear: users must exercise care, remain aware, and be prepared for potential instances of abuse when engaging with the platform.

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