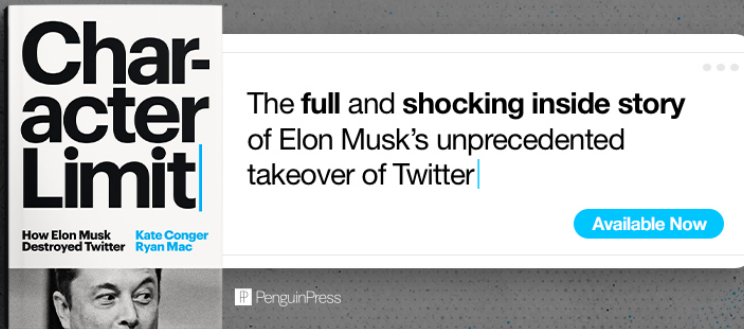




**Concerning.** Kate Conger and Ryan Mac's excellent book, *Character Limit: How Elon Musk Destroyed Twitter* is an insightful and rarely flattering fly-on-the-wall story of the biggest deal in social media history.

Remember the Halcyon Days of Twitter? Back when the likes of @dril's increasingly unhinged brand of surrealist humour had the internet in stitches? When politicians simply couldn't be arsed with the platform and when it was so easy to distinguish which celebrity was real and which was a poor attempt at impersonation?

It feels weird to lament the passing of those days, for Twitter has never really been an especially great platform. In fact, it's radically out-populated by the likes of Facebook and YouTube, but to compare the Twitter of 10 years ago or even 3 years ago feels like a breath of fresh air from the absolute cesspool of racist, white nationalist misinformation that floods the platform now known as X every day.

At the centre of the company's radical shift is the mercurial billionaire, Elon Musk. Musk, the owner of SpaceX and Tesla, bought the company for an eye-watering fee of \$44bn back in October of 2022 and has overseen a series of changes that has turned the microblogging site on its head. From failed product launches, a genuinely baffling and totally unnecessary re-branding and a series of feature launches that literally no one asked for, seems to have taken its toll on just about everyone. Twitter's userbase is fleeing in droves as porn and spam bots litter the app, staff members are subjected to increasingly draconian levels of treatment from the company's executive team and Musk himself seems to be in the throes of potentially the most severe example of buyer's remorse in human history.

The ultimate question then, is how do you make a story like that compelling? This is, after all, a story that has played out on everyone's timelines for the past 2 or so years and has been so heavily reported on, that re-litigating it all over again can seem like a near-Sisyphean task.

But, authors, Kate Conger and Ryan Mac, reporters for *The New York Times*, have the essential answer: Telling you everything you thought you knew, in far more detail. It's a strategy that pays off remarkably well.

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Conger and Mac's weighty tome opens with one of the book's many anecdotes. An unnamed data scientist nervously awaiting a meeting with Twitter's new owner, Elon Musk. The data scientist, already on his way out of the company, has decided to give the company's new owner a few insights of his own to potentially improve the company. Midway through, the data scientist decides to challenge Musk over his most recent tweets.

In a move that would become all too familiar all too quickly, Musk gave credence to an utterly baseless conspiracy theory on the platform the night before, regarding the 52nd speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi's husband Paul, and an incident at their home. Musk shared a story telling the world that Pelosi's husband was involved in a tryst with an intruder, who proceeded to assault him. The data scientist tells Musk that his sharing of the story was unnecessary and painted Musk as a gullible man. Musk's response? Two words: "Fuck you".

This exchange, told in the first 4 pages of the book's Introduction sets the tone for the rest of the book. Cogner and Mac's alarming levels of insight is the foundation that *Character Limit* is built upon. The book's final chapter reveals that the book is built off over 150 hours of interviews with over 100 subjects, court filings, publicly available text messages and unprecedented access to internal emails, meeting recordings, Slack messages, email exchanges and anything else a journalist could ever possibly want. This marvel of unfiltered access is reported throughout the book "verbatim" as told by the authors themselves.

Despite the book's subtitle (*How Elon Musk Destroyed Twitter*), it's not just Musk who comes in for a bit of a pasting. The name of the book, *Character Limit*, is of course a reference to Twitter's famous limit on tweets, preventing users from saying anything over 140 characters (eventually upped to 280), but also on the limit of those involved. No one comes off especially well. Twitter's co-founder and former chairman Jack Dorsey is perhaps the worst culprit here, portrayed as inept, unfocused, undermining his legal counsel as they try to save the platform and adopting a rather cringey health guru image for himself; Dorsey, who was initially in favour of Musk's takeover, and even helped the billionaires with his bid by rolling stock over for him to make the bid happen, is left to watch in a state of silent horror as Musk begins to dismantle the company from the top to the bottom with lightning speed and total disregard for all that came before it.

While *Character Limit* is, ostensibly, a timeline of the events that led to the purchase of the company by Musk, it also serves as a deep-dive into Musk's personal and work life. From affairs with staffers to the possibility of a family intervention on his rampant drug use, Musk's personal life as compelling as his business dealings.

Of course, Musk's decision to buy Twitter (an impulsive decision he made after being told not to criticise the Twitter board by CEO Parag Agrawal just before Musk joined the board) is laid out in stunning detail. From refusing to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) when purchasing the company and thus preventing his lawyers from beginning the "due diligence" process to trying to back out of the deal through constant references to non-existent spam bots. Perhaps the most stunning detail from all of this, however, is Cogner and Mac's revelation that Musk attempted to make Twitter themselves cover a portion of the purchase price. Musk, at that point shy of the purchase price by about \$400m, asked the company to wire him the required funds so he could complete the deal. It was something out of *The Sopranos* and even then, you'd like to think that Tony Soprano would have known how utterly ridiculous the request was.

Perhaps more perplexing, is the insular cadre of people that Musk surrounds himself with. In 2023, Walter Isaacson released a gushing, sycophantic biography of Musk (which Musk shamelessly promoted at every chance he got) and is often at the heart of many of Twitter's key decisions, despite having no experience in any of it. Other Musk cronies such as Jason Calacanis, Steve Davis and Alex Spiro are probably going to want to give this particular book a miss, if they can.

*Character Limit* is full of anecdotes and stories that are sure to leave your mouth agape. Perhaps the most obvious one is the company's disastrous launch of the Twitter Blue initiative. Correctly sensing that Twitter was becoming too reliant on its advertisers, Musk wanted to re-double the company's efforts to expand their Twitter Blue service, a paid membership that would give users access to more features on the platform. However, Musk wanted to include something else with it... Twitter's famous blue checkmark.

The launch (which was only possible from around-the-clock working from his engineering underlings for 3 months straight) was a total disaster as misinformations spread like wildfire throughout the platform, and impersonations began to swarm left, right and centre. Initially, Musk

found the whole thing highly amusing (his engineers did not). Eventually, advertisers decided that they'd had enough and began to withhold spending on the platform, but not before the trolls had had their final say, eventually tanking the stock price of Ely Lilly (an American pharmaceutical company), by telling the world that "insulin was now free". The idea was killed in less than 24 hours, and launched again a few weeks later.

Musk's time at Twitter seems to have been marked by a seemingly never-ending barrage of personal and corporate failings, and *Character Limit* isn't about to let up in re-hashing everything in minute detail. His disaster of a poll on Twitter asking if he should remain CEO was possibly one of the most humiliating things he has ever experienced and, according to the book, led to a mental health episode that took weeks to recover from. Equally embarrassing, but arguably more petty, was Musk leaving the Super Bowl early so as to insist that Twitter engineers boost his tweets in the app's algorithm after receiving less views on his tweets than President Joe Biden. He also fired one engineer who suggested that he was less popular now than he was.

If there is a fault to the book, it is the lack of information around the company's re-brand. Twitter's name-change is perhaps the most baffling decision of all during Musk's tenure, given that he changed probably one of the greatest brands in the history of marketing for virtually no reason at all, changing the iconic bird-themed branding for an unedifying, bland and utterly pointless unicode: ☒.

Despite being one of Musk's biggest changes on the site, the re-brand is given just two pages of coverage, and is essentially glossed over. Given the detail of other anecdotes in the book, it would have been interesting to see just how much opposition Musk faced over the call to re-brand the site, both internally and externally, but given the voluminous amounts of detail already in the book, the lack of detail regarding ☒ is understandable.

Telling the end of the story is perhaps the hardest part for Cogner and Mac. At what point do you call time? Twitter is still going and until Musk inevitably tanks the entire thing, the show must go on. *Character Limit*'s main issue is that even as quick as the authors were to publish the book, it's already been over-taken by more recent news. At the time of publishing, Musk is currently embroiled in constant back-and-forth with Brazil as the app races to be un-blocked in the country and is engaged in a truly bizarre lawsuit with advertising platform Media Matters, which was promoted by his bumbling inept new CEO, Linda Yaccarino. Two extremely salacious bits of news that will, sadly, go un-mentioned in the book.

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*Character Limit* is a masterclass in investigative journalism. The levels of access afforded to Cogner and Mac is enough to rival even Musk himself. It makes for a compelling retelling of one of the 21st century's biggest tech deals, one that continues to reverberate even now.

Musk's purchase of Twitter will likely stand as one of the biggest examples of buyer's remorse in the history of corporate acquisitions, but, I can safely say that you won't be experiencing the same feeling with *Character Limit*.