

THEN & NOW

by Alejandro de la Garza

- 1 Last year, Elon Musk seemed to have escaped the force of gravity. Stock prices for carmaker Tesla hit all-time highs, while SpaceX had landed a NASA contract to put astronauts on the moon. It was, as my colleagues and I wrote in the 2021 Person of the Year profile, “the year of Elon Unbound.”
- 2 But hurtling through space, one risks falling into the orbit of something else. Musk has spent an increasing share of his time on Twitter in recent years – 4-1 that paved the way for him to buy the platform this year for \$44 billion.
- 3 Musk found success on the leading edge of technological change. Twitter, though, was an aging empire, and the revolution that Musk proposed was based not on innovation but on politics. He’s spent the year banging a “free speech” drum to justify 4-2, and in the weeks since the sale went through has reinstated once banned users and even appeared to take direction from the far right over which left-wing accounts to delete. He wants to rebuild the platform, but his shake-ups have cut engineering talent to the bone and cost the company many of the moderators who helped assuage advertisers’ fears over toxic content. As of Nov. 22, half of the platform’s top 100 advertisers had left, according to progressive watchdog group Media Matters for America.
- 4 Observers might point out that Musk’s 5 is what brought him success in the first place. But his brashness has formerly been checked by other forces – among them former NASA engineers at SpaceX and Tesla CTO JB Straubel, known for insulating subordinates from Musk’s ever shifting demands. There are no Straubels surrounding Musk at Twitter. He may yet remake the world’s information universe as he sees fit. More likely, this is Musk’s white whale, his Russian campaign. To grow, one must have an understanding of one’s own limitations. Musk appears to have lost sight of his.



time.com, 2022