

## **The Relation Between Media Ownership Structure and Public Sphere in Digital Capitalist System: Research on Platform X**

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### **Abstract**

New forms of communication created by communication technologies and especially social media necessitate a re-evaluation of the concept of public space within the framework of digitization. By focusing on economic and political power relations within social media, this study argues that new media instruments are subject to the free market-oriented capitalist mode of production and that monopolistic formations are in direct relationship with the ownership structure of networks. As a matter of fact, multinational companies and political decision-makers are dominant actors in the information field produced by new communication technologies in terms of ownership and manageability. The main purpose of the study is to evaluate the debate on whether social media can create a democratic public sphere through Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and rebrand it under the name X. In this regard, Elon Musk's effort to shape online discourses on platform X during US Presidential Elections in 2024 was interpreted by analyzing 407 posts between October 30 - November 5. According to the results, the idea that social media creates a democratic public space ignores the potential of these areas to reproduce power relations in the capitalist social structure. As a result of applications such as algorithm-based automation processes and target audience analysis, the digital public space has been put into a frame with certain concepts like "echo chamber" and "filter bubble". For this reason, social media platforms are moving away from one of the essential requirements of public sphere, namely the function of bringing different ideas together. In light of Twitter, Musk's acquisition of it has undermined the public sphere discourse that was put forward in reference to social media platforms.

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## **1. Introduction**

This study, shaped within the framework of critical political economy of media, deals with fundamental effects of capitalist private ownership as a predominant factor on a global scale on the development of media and public sphere. As a matter of fact, the issue of ownership, particularly the capitalist private ownership of means of production is one of the fundamental areas for sociological, political and economic analysis (Knoche, 2023: 92). In the context of media ownership, the capitalist mode of production and its corresponding production relations prevail. The concentration of ownership in media organizations around the world and the dominance of a few groups in media industry are quite disadvantageous not only for precarious, wage earners, professional media workers/producers, but also for the relation between media and public sphere.

Some scholars have suggested that the internet and social media platforms have the potential to rebuild public sphere and create a virtual one. They have interpreted the emergence of digital media as a second structural transformation of public sphere (Schafer, 2015: 3). It has been argued that new media can change social communication in a radical way and revitalize public sphere (Habermas, 2006: 414-418). A participatory culture, without interference of any corporations and governments, has been assumed to be an essential feature of social media (Jenkins, 2006: 3-8). In other words, social media was recognized in the early years of the 21st century as platforms for connecting, interacting, creating communities and thus improving democracy (Castells, 2013: 5-11). It has been emphasized that online media allows more people to make their voices heard in society (Dahlgren, 2009: 45-52). The fact that content can be easily shared online without any interventions of gatekeepers and the difficulty of controlling interaction between users have been associated with public debates. Additionally, it has been claimed that groups marginalized by traditional media can strengthen opposition discourses in new communication environments (Benkler, 2006: 212-220; Papacharissi, 2010: 120-127).

In this sense, it becomes important to determine whether or to what extent an online equivalent or substitute for public sphere discourse has developed. In this regard, many academic studies have addressed the digital public sphere. Some of these studies draw attention to relatively open, easy and fast access to information provided by online media. This wealth of information is presented in new, interactive and potentially more accessible ways and it is argued that it would lead to more in-depth public debates (Schafer, 2015: 3). The proponents of this argument, so-called technological optimists, have argued that online media can help produce new types of communication. Collaborative non-market social media tools such as Wikis have been portrayed as an effective way to circumvent the commercial logic that affects traditional media communication (Schafer, 2015: 5).

In contrast, technological pessimists' express concerns regarding whether conditions for public debate online may produce alternative forms of communication or not. For them digitization, as an area where dominant media structures continue to exist, has not brought any equilibrium between power relations throughout society, has not eliminated inequalities, but on the contrary has created new types of inequalities. The problematic relationship between the concentration of media ownership and democracy also matters. Media concentration is seen as a source of public concern because it could end media pluralism and diversity. The concentration of media ownership reduces content diversity, marginalizes less popular and therefore expensive content and commodifies information by creating a culture industry. According to Van Dijck (2013), with the increase in number of users, public sphere has begun to disappear on platforms purchased by large commercial companies such as Google, Yahoo, Amazon and Facebook. For him, commercial companies have made sociability a technical phenomenon instead of socializing the web. To put it another way, people increase the power of social media owners by producing data about their daily life practices and losing their privacy by sharing their personal data. One of the examples of digital media concentration that Van Dijck points out is Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter. The acquisition of Twitter by Musk has sparked intense debate about the delicate balance between freedom of expression and content moderation in digital public sphere. This article evaluates significant changes in content moderation and freedom of expression policies on Twitter following Elon Musk's controversial acquisition in 2022 in exchange for \$44 billion in the context of the digital public sphere.

Within this framework, the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk in 2022 represents a critical case for reassessing the democratic potential of social media platforms. Musk's transformation of Twitter into X, coupled with significant changes in content moderation policies and algorithmic visibility, has intensified debates on freedom of expression, political manipulation, and the privatization of the digital public sphere. This study argues that rather than expanding democratic participation, the transformation of Twitter under Musk exemplifies the re-feudalization of the public sphere, where political communication becomes increasingly shaped by private ownership and economic power.

## 2. A Critical Political Economy of Media

Political economy is a scientific discipline that examines the production and exchange of necessary tools to sustain people's material existence (Yaylagül, 2006: 123). It emerged as an approach used by classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo in the 19th century to explain capitalist social order and analyze the social relations of production (Adaklı, 2006: 22). Özçetin (2018: 208) states that it is possible to divert attention to specific operations of the communications industry by referring to Mosco's following definition: "*Political economy in its narrow sense is the examination of social relations, especially power relations, that mutually constitute production, distribution and consumption of resources. One of*

*these resources is communicative resources.*” This political economic approach in the field of communication, as a criticism of mainstream communication studies in the 1970s, rejected the existence of separate fields such as economics, politics and communication and centered on the interaction "*between economic organization and political, social and cultural life*" (Başaran, 2010: 89).

In this respect, the political economy of media examines media content and the production and distribution of these contents in the cultural field. The political economic approach has a critical meaning in media studies. The critical approach examines the ownership and control of the media, relations of media industries with other industrial structures and political/economic centers of power (Yaylagül, 2006: 127-131). Messages in media are primarily exchangeable commodities within capitalist production relations, but unlike other commodities, they also have ideological functions that reproduce the dominant social structure and power relations. Critical political economy of media argues that these messages have the power to shape public discourse (Wittel, 2019: 392-400). Unlike the liberal paradigm, this critical political economic approach does not see the media as an impartial and transparent means of communication. It suggests that the media, as an area of social struggle where ownership and power relations take place, is shaped by these power struggles (Wayne, 2015: 59; Yaylagül, 2022: 121). Areas of study in critical political economy of communication include media activism, media and social movements, commodification of media contents, audience and communication labor, capital accumulation models of media, media and public sphere, corporate concentration in the communication industry, commercialization of media, etc. (Fuchs, 2015: 35-36). The political economy of traditional mass media focuses on various changes in the media in terms of ownership structure, control and political power (Dahlgren, 2012: 46). When it comes to information and communication technologies, the political economy of communication continues to use similar forms of analysis. Productive forces and relations of production shape structures of new media and digital communication environment (Berkman, 2014: 46).

Unlike traditional mass media, digital platforms possess algorithmic mechanisms that actively shape visibility and prioritize specific narratives. This form of algorithmic governance transforms media ownership into a structural form of power that directly affects political communication and public opinion formation.

The 1980s and '90s were periods when information and communication technologies were used effectively, especially by multinational companies and their impact on the capital accumulation process increased. Especially between 1995 and 2000, the acceleration of investments in digital sectors and excessive speculation in the technology sector caused a concentration defined as the 'dot.com bubble'. When the dot.com bubble burst in 2000, the total loss suffered by these companies was over 5 trillion dollars (Alemdar, 2023). According to Wayne (2015: 62), the fall of this dot.com bubble is the direct result of unfounded and extreme promises of new technologies and the validity of basic dynamics of capital such as over-

accumulation, competition and insatiable search for profit. Fuchs (2016: 50-51) evaluates the discourse that web 2.0 has new and different democratic potentials after the 2000 crisis as an ideological expression to persuade new investors. In this new era, a new regime of world wide web has begun to emerge step by step, turning individuals from being mere consumers into content producers with their comments, profile pages and shares. SixDegrees, one of the first social networks, was founded in 1997 and reached 3.5 million users in a short time. SixDegrees was followed by social networks such as Friendster (2002), Myspace (2003) and Facebook (2004). In the inauguration speech of web 2.0 conference held in 2004, Tim O'Reilly used the phrase "Customers will build their business for you..." for this new business model. The increase in internet penetration and widespread smartphones have also given a strong acceleration to social networks (Bayram, 2020).

Unlike traditional one, new media refers to digital and interactive media, internet networks and social communication media. Manovich (2023: 27-48) lists 5 features of new media that are different from traditional media and peculiar to its own character as digital representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding. The most important difference between traditional media and new media is the interaction element found in the latter. Thus, the viewer/reader/user can contribute to contents (Timisi, 2003: 133). The user content emphasized here is used to describe blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, video/image/file sharing platforms and wikis within new media with terms like "social media" and "web 2.0." (Fuchs, 2016: 49). Thanks to the "interactivity" of digital media and its ability to enable individuals to become active users, boundaries of broadcasting activities have disappeared and the transition from web 1.0 to web 2.0 has increased the importance of user-created and shared contents (Brigs and Burke, 2023: 371). Social media applications have been defined as a distinct communication field; it is instantaneous, fast, its content is produced by the user, it is based on voluntary sharing, collaborative, amateur, mobile, open to interaction and dialogue, horizontal, viral, unpredictable, difficult to control, reactive, regular, a platform in which individual and different voices co-exist and are visible, hybrid, alternative, participatory; overall it emphasizes identity sharing and freedom of expression (Şener, 2013: 6). At this point, it is possible to define social media as "*communicative forms streaming user-generated contents that allow a certain user interaction*" (Lovnik, 2017: 52). New forms of communication created by communication technologies and especially social media require a re-evaluation of the concept of public sphere within the framework of digitization.

### 3. Reevaluating Public Sphere in the Context of Digitization

Alternative approaches such as Benkler's (2006) networked public sphere and Dahlgren's (2009) civic cultures emphasize the participatory potential of digital media. While these approaches highlight important dimensions of online communication, this study aligns with critical political economy by arguing that structural ownership relations fundamentally constrain such potential. Participation

within privately owned platforms does not eliminate power asymmetries but often obscures them.

Outlines of the concept of public sphere were drawn by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his work titled *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Habermas's discussion of the public sphere is based on a critical analysis of the relationship between media, power and the public. For him the principles of public sphere, as a phenomenon first developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, include open discussion of all public issues in which matters of public interest can be subjected to discussion and examination. The public sphere is an area where individuals discuss public issues and mediates between society and the state. It has a potential impact on power by creating a critical consensus and making the state accountable to its citizens. He argues that the public sphere can be called as "factory of politics" (cited in Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 16). Therefore, the public sphere presupposes freedoms of expression and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debates and decision-making processes. In this sense Habermas insists on the role of the media as an important ground and catalyst for the existence of the public sphere. If citizens are to play a role in democracy, they must have access to an institutionally secured forum in which they can express their views and question established power. This forum should be established on a public principle. It is necessary to have public opinion that will be formed through rational-critical discussion of personal views of private individuals in an explicit and unrestrained way. The media has the possibility to form the main forum of political communication. Therefore, the media can be expressed as a public sphere where relations between establishment and citizens take place (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 11-16).

However, the public sphere requires overcoming power inequalities in search of a compromise in favor of the public good. It should explicitly seek to balance differences by facilitating the representation of the less powerful and organizing discourses of the more powerful to reach a fair and viable compromise (cited in Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 24). According to Habermas (1989), the way mass media select, and present topics is driven by economic pressures and political preferences. In his later analyses, Habermas pointed out the existence of a commercial mass media public sphere, stating that public discourse is determined and framed in line with economic interests of media organizations, and he called this process the re-feudalization of public sphere (Kaiser et al., 2017). For Fuchs (2021: 13), accumulation, advertising, monopolization, commercialization, commodification, speed and surveillance have transformed the digital public sphere into a colonized and feudalized space, a so-called digital public sphere that is public only in appearance. As a result, the mass media have become a communication forum under the strong influence of power, and this power excludes smaller institutions and civil society while privileging powerful and institutionalized actors, thus effectively weakening the public sphere. Having been influenced by critical theory, Habermas (1989) have criticized the media for providing a false public sphere that distracts the public from political action and for functioning more as an area of public relations. He states that the public sphere is a mere promise due to

political manipulations made through mass media. According to him, rational-critical social reasons have been transformed into a depoliticized mass manipulated by persuasive authority.

The concept of the public sphere is used to signify common areas of social activity where thoughts, discourses and actions are produced/developed to determine and realize the common benefit of society (Eren, 2015: 19). In this context, the literature on the relationship between social media and public sphere takes shape around two common views. It is possible to define these two different views as “cyberoptimists” and “cyberskeptics” or as “techno-utopians” and “techno-dystopians” (Çoban, 2014: 66; Özçetin et al., 2012: 52). Techno-optimists highlight the possibility of the freedom provided by social media to create a new public sphere. According to techno-optimists, social media could assist in the creation of participatory democracy and an alternative public sphere due to its features such as equality, freedom and publicity (Tetik, 2015: 195). This approach takes social media as a tool that expands various areas of social and political freedom by creating new forms of organization against the oppressive and authoritarian structure of states (Çoban, 2014: 66). Castells (2013) refers to the presence of communicative autonomy in “network society”, as opposed to the control of the state and large media groups that exist in traditional media. At this point, digital social networks allow the organization and coordination of social actions to be carried out without any controls of political power. However, Castells (2013: 24-25) states that social media is only one of the components through which social movements engage with society, and that social movements should also be visible in areas of social life that are not limited to the internet. Kahn and Kellner (2004, cited in Özçetin et al., 55) put a similar emphasis on the power of social media to nourish and spread social movements. On the other hand, Timisi (2003: 82) defines traditional media as an environment where the minority communicates with the majority, he states that new media allows the majority to access the content they want.

By contrast, the critical approach focuses on problems regarding accessibility and the economic and political power relations in which social media exists. Fuchs (2016) deals with the question whether social media via Twitter a public space within the framework of the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement is. Having based his approach on the concept of public sphere in Habermas, Fuchs argues that the public sphere includes dimensions such as creating public opinion, its accessibility for all citizens, and creating an environment for unrestrained debate on the public interest and the rules of government. In his discussion, Fuchs states that the “powerful” on Twitter are politically decisive. This area is under the domination of young and educated middle-class and excludes other social segments such as farmers and senior citizens. In social media, not all individuals have the same formal education and financial resources to participate in the public sphere (Fuchs, 2016: 266-280). While Fuchs suggests that social media can increase citizens' participation in public debates by providing new opportunities for the dissemination of information and communication, he also emphasizes that social

media platforms are controlled by private companies and these companies commodify user data to generate advertising revenues. This is an important factor that limits the potential of social media for public opinion (Fuchs, 2014: 64-72). Media organizations need to make a profit to survive, and profitability is dependent on advertising. Advertisers are interested in those who are likely to buy their products. Increasingly, most media content aims to appeal to advertisers and therefore focuses on the key preoccupations of their target audience. Inevitably it means that issues affecting rural people, the poor and other minorities are not a commercial priority. As a matter of fact, these people do not constitute a market for advertisers. And so, the media have many benefits in creating new arenas of public debate, though there is no incentive for these arenas to include concerns of disadvantaged groups. This unequal situation also applies to new media environments. The deep and fundamental knowledge gap between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, young and old also manifests itself in the context of new communication technologies. At this point, it is useful to remember the concept of digital gap used in relation to digital technologies. As a matter of fact, there is a problem regarding the public sphere in digital environments.

Papacharissi (2002: 12-13) indicates that the internet makes political participation possible only for those who have access to computers. Moving political debate to a virtual space excludes those who do not have the same access. According to him, taking part in the new media does not guarantee anybody to be a part of the political environment. Bauman, on the other hand, finds the "interactive" feature attributed to new media exaggerated and says that "at best, it is a one-way interactive tool". According to him, the internet is not for everyone and will probably never be available for universal use (Bauman 2012: 58). Morozov states that social media platforms are used effectively for propaganda, manipulation and surveillance by authoritarian regimes. For Morozov (2011: 212) groups organized on social media platforms or actions such as clicking the "like" button give people a feeling of passive participation rather than creating a real political change and may prevent them from acting in real life.

Many features of the internet subject to various evaluations regarding its potential to enrich democracy. Particularly, social media is seen as a free environment and people can express themselves more easily on these platforms (İnceoğlu and Çoban, 2015: 21). In relation to individuals, the anonymity, freedom and non-limiting structure of social media creates an irresistible attraction in the context of political communication and organization. Nevertheless, the debate on defining social media as a public sphere is linked to the way social movements use this medium (Gümüş, 2013: 33-37). There are many examples of how new media spaces can turn into public spaces during social incidents. Especially social movements such as Iranian protests after 2010, Arab Spring, Occupy Movement and Gezi Park protests have intensified this debate. It has been argued that social media played an important role in all these events, and it has been claimed that people discuss and take action freely thanks to social media. Gerbaudo (2012: 2-3) admits that social media has become a tool that profoundly affects the way social movements communicate, organize and act yet he also underlines the risk of

becoming superficial for activism. Similarly, he also draws attention to the potential of social media to be used as a tool of surveillance and censorship by authoritarian regimes.

The widespread utilization of social media, especially after web 2.0, is considered a new era for digital activism since it was limited in the web 1.0 period (Şener, 2013: 254). According to Çoban (2014), the internet and especially social media have changed the structure and functioning of social movements. The central and hierarchical structure has been replaced by a flexible structure based on a polycentric and horizontal network of relationships. New social movements often use social media tools rather than relying on traditional organizational structures (Stroer and Rodrigez, 2020). At this juncture, the struggle for public space in contemporary social movements helps to re-understand the role of new media and social media. According to Papacharissi (2002: 10), the increasing effectiveness of online political groups and activism is indicative of the political use of the internet. Castells (2013: 21) indicates that social actors can fight against power by developing autonomous and horizontal communication networks on technological platforms. The way social media platforms and notably Twitter is used by activists to spread messages of reform and democratization against authoritarian regimes is both remarkable and hopeful (Brigs and Burke, 2023: 394-395). However, there is a fact that nobody should ignore: social media focuses on companies that have capitalist relations and have commercial purposes such as advertising and marketing. In this regard it is worth stating that in the context of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis on culture industry, giant companies have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a field of rational discussion into a field of manipulative consumption and passivity. As a result of this transformation, public discourse began to be shaped not by rational consensus arising from discussion, negotiation and reflection, but by themes produced and limited by media companies. Rational discussions and consensus have left their place to manipulation led by the machines of media companies. Citizens of the public sphere have now become primarily consumers. Advertising and various distractions have largely undermined the critical discourse (Staab and Thiel, 2022: 130). According to Brie (2022), the analysis of capitalist ownership and production relations in the media industry and their consequences on the public sphere reveals two main findings. First, there is the fundamental irreformability of production in capitalist media enterprises controlled by private ownership. The second finding shows the necessity of producing alternative journalism through media organizations based on non-capitalist forms of ownership, as they actively shape the public sphere. However, he considers the goal of complete decapitalization and decommodification of media production as a genuine utopia.

Very few giant global companies own media and control media content around the world. These multinational technology companies have the financial means to constantly invest in research and development, regularly introducing new products to internet users and thus significantly impacting their online experiences (Haucap and Heimeshoff, 2014). For Deane (2010: 184), this concentration of

media ownership undermines the discourse of public sphere. The alternative is the reinvention of national public service media. Thus, a global public space will be created where people can communicate with each other without being filtered and censored by corporate and commercial interests. The means of production of public service media belong to the public. The production and circulation of content is based on non-profit logic. Access is universal, as all citizens are provided with easy access to the content and technologies of public service media. In political terms, public service media provide diverse and inclusive content that encourages political understanding and discourse. In cultural terms, educational contents that contribute to the cultural development of individuals and society are produced. In other words, it must produce and deliver content and services that will help improve democracy, education and culture. Public service media are independent media organizations that are legally supported by the state but not controlled by the state (Fuchs, 2021: 14). According to Knoche (2023: 98), due to existing social power relations, there is no real possibility for the elimination of capitalist private ownership of the means of production in the media sector at present and soon. Public demands for the “nationalization” of private media organizations are largely in vain. The ideals of expropriation in the media sector are impossible in practice due to political, legal, ideological and economic factors.

#### **4. Concentration of Media Ownership in The Digitization Process**

The capitalist mentality depends on the accumulation of power. The logic of accumulation also shapes politics and culture. In a capitalist society, politics is the area of accumulation of decision power. On the other hand, culture is the field of reputation accumulation. Inequalities and injustices are direct results of this logic of accumulation. The capitalist economy is shaped by the exploitation of labor and the asymmetric distribution of wealth. According to Fuchs (2021: 10), digital capitalism is not a new phase of capitalist development, but rather a dimension of the organization of capitalism shaped by digital mediation. In digital capitalism, social processes such as power accumulation, capital accumulation, class struggles, political struggles, hegemony, ideology, commodification or globalization are mediated by digital technologies. Digital capital exploits communication and digital labor. This situation has led to the emergence of capitalist monopolies in the digital industry.

In the last twenty years, the concentration of ownership in media and communication sectors has gained an unprecedented pace, as digital platform companies have taken control of global communication networks, especially the internet (Trappel and Meier, 2022: 148). Giant companies like Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft - referred to as GAFAM - have established wide influence within the internet ecosystem and dominated certain markets. Especially since the 1990s, the commercialization of the internet has paved the way for companies such as GAFAM to make huge profits by using this infrastructure (Fontanel and Sushcheva, 2019: 7). Owing to their vertical and horizontal integration strategies, these companies operate as monopolies in a wide range of

areas, from the basic elements of the internet infrastructure to online services that interact directly with users. Microsoft and Apple share the operating system market for computers. Google, Microsoft and Amazon are leaders in the cloud computing market with their huge data centers with millions of servers. Google, Apple and Microsoft have significant shares in the email services market. Facebook, on the other hand, dominates the mobile messaging market with its Messenger and WhatsApp applications (Smyrnaio, 2016: 75-76). The acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk is evaluated through the behavior of people who have investments in different fields to expand and/or secure their investments, as in the ownership structure of traditional media (Yıldırım and Ayan, 2014: 136). As a result of this acquisition, Musk has increased his potential to compete with technology companies that have their own digital media, such as Alphabet (Google, YouTube), Twitter, Meta (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram), Apple, Amazon (The Washington Post) and Microsoft. On the other hand, the procurement of data flow necessary for companies such as SpaceX, Starlink, Tesla, The Boring Company, Neuralink, OpenAI and SolarCity is among the reasons for the acquisition of Twitter (Yazıcı, 2022).

No doubt, the operation and management of basic communication infrastructures by private sector providers is not a phenomenon peculiar to the present era. However, such a level of concentration of power was not achieved even in earlier stages of media consolidation. The concentration of media ownership is a market reality and a source of public concern. Digitalization has made a global media market possible and has raised issues regarding the consequences of media concentration in terms of pluralism and diversity (Trappel and Meier, 2022: 150). It is stated that media ownership concentration restricts political and cultural diversity and weakens citizens' ability to obtain/share information and ideas necessary to make informed decisions about public life (Freedman, 2014: 170).

Concentration in digital media has created a model based on capital accumulation through the exploitation of creative labor. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are not established for people to organize, but are companies structured to make profits. These profit-oriented companies need real people (users) from all classes. Due to the interaction feature of social media, users are both commodities marketed to advertising companies, shopping consumers, and content producers (Özinanır, 2012). Every user in social media platforms is a producer and produces surplus value. Even if an individual is online on social media and does not share anything, it generates meaningful data and brings profit to social media companies. In this sense, just having an account with certain parameters as a user is sufficient (Şeker, 2019: 7). Fuchs and Seignani (2013: 237) explain online behaviors of users on social platforms through the concept of playbour [play-labour], a combination of words game and labor. As a result of playbour, advertisers can offer targeted advertising based on user interests and online behavior. According to Fuchs (2015: 368-369), users on social media platforms who do not get any wage for their labor are unpaid workers. Capital accumulation in social media is built on producer-consumer commodification, unpaid labor of internet

users, targeted advertising and economic surveillance. Social media tools realize capital accumulation with the help of targeted advertising tailored to individual user data and their behaviors. Users' click-and-buy process is the process by which advertising companies realize added value. This process transforms surplus value into monetary profit (Fuchs, 2015: 149-156). At this point, Fuchs has created the basic arguments of an important debate regarding the political economy of social media.

In Zuboff's (2019) analysis, the data produced in the context of the commercial internet has a central space. Data is a byproduct of digital communication. But as a by-product, it is the real profitable raw material of the commercial internet. As a matter of fact, data is used to create detailed profiles of users, and these profiles are converted into money through advertising. The raw material, data, is extracted through surveillance processes that, according to Zuboff, constitute the essence of digital media. In recent years, an increasing number of companies have begun to base their value creation on surveillance profits. Therefore, Zuboff assumes that surveillance capitalism will advance rapidly. Surveillance capitalism reflects the rise of an economic logic focused on measuring, influencing, and ultimately controlling our behavior (Staab and Thiel, 2022: 135). For Zuboff (2019: 65), the purpose of platform providers, with their privileged position, is neither the collection of historical data nor their processing to predict future behavior. Their main goal is to create certain behavioral patterns. In other words, the goal is to create or prevent certain human behaviors through environmental control.

Recent discussions on digital capitalism further emphasize the role of platforms as infrastructures of capital accumulation. Srnicek's (2017) concept of platform capitalism highlights how digital platforms extract value by controlling data flows, visibility, and user interaction. Similarly, Couldry and Mejias (2019) conceptualize data colonialism as the appropriation of human life and social relations as raw material for capitalist extraction. These perspectives complement critical political economic approaches by emphasizing how platform ownership structures systematically limit democratic communication.

As Papacharissi points out (2002: 18), the innovative use of the internet as a public tool does not change the fact that it is built within the capitalist paradigm and is a fundamental part of that social and political world. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention the tendency for the internet to be controlled by governments and companies as a commercialized area closed to social control. These centers of power are trying to build the internet as a means of commercial interests on the one hand, and as a surveillance and control mechanism on the other. Its underlying reasons are that the internet is not accessible to everyone, that it lacks the minimum order required for a common public domain, and that it is rapidly and increasingly being colonized by commercial interests (Özçetin, 2015: 185-190). As Wayne suggests (2015: 319), capital concentration in the media, dependence on advertising, and concentration of agenda-setting power in hands of a small number of actors restrict individuals' access to different opinions and information and

negatively affect democratic participation and public opinion formation. However, the business design of search engines based on using algorithms to direct popular content to audiences also poses a threat to diversity. According to Benson (2019: 72), the market concentration of digital platforms such as Google and Facebook in the USA causes serious concerns. These platforms keep almost all the online advertising revenue. They design their algorithms to highlight sensational and polarizing content that will keep users on the platform for as long as possible; in this way, it threatens democracy by manipulating the flow of communication.

Trappel and Meier (2022: 151) have put forward following determinations regarding risks of media concentration. In their view, media concentration suppresses alternative voices and eliminates freedom of thought and diversity of ideas. Corporate control forces editors to follow the media owner's agenda rather than the public interest. If there is any economic or political benefit, powerful media companies may decide to provide unilateral political support, thus influencing or even distorting election results. Thus, they can become powerful political actors. In other words, the editorial and economic power of media can turn into political power. Thus, concentration of media ownership increases the risk of politics being corrupted for mutual benefit. Leslie Moonves, former chief executive officer of CBS, made an important confession regarding the media-politics relationship in a statement he made in 2016. According to Moonves, "Trump's presidency may be bad for the USA, but it is very good for CBS" (Benson, 2019: 73). Trump himself has a similar thought. In fact, his words in an interview with Newsweek are as follows: "The media needs me to win again in 2020, otherwise their profits will plummet."

## **5. Twitter's Sales Process and Its Transformation**

Founded by Jack Dorsey in 2006, Twitter started its life as a micro-blogging service where short internet messages called tweets consisting of 140 characters could be sent and the messages of others could be read (Korkmaz, 2015: 98). Twitter's features such as hashtags, trends, and followed topics have been used by individuals to get news and engage in daily discussions. Various social and political events, such as the Arab Spring in 2010, Hong Kong protests in 2014, and the US presidential election in 2016, contributed to Twitter's acceptance as a news source with user-generated content (Murty, 2019: 99-100).

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter began in early 2022, when he became the largest shareholder of the platform, owning 9.2% of its shares. On April 14, 2022, Musk made an offer to purchase all of Twitter in exchange for \$54.20 per share or \$44 billion in total. Twitter management accepted Musk's offer on April 25, but the process did not proceed smoothly. Musk wanted to step back, citing concerns about the number of bot accounts on the platform, and a lawsuit was filed against him on charges of stock manipulation. Following the legal process and public discussions, the agreement was completed on October 27, 2022. After he fired senior executives in a short time, Musk signaled upcoming important changes on the platform. In the months following the acquisition, Twitter experienced

extensive transformations. The CEO, CFO and senior executives in the legal team were dismissed, and large-scale layoffs targeted the teams responsible for monitoring misinformation and banned content on the platform. Content moderation policies have been changed and Twitter Blue, a paid subscription service offering verification badges, has been introduced. With the implementation of new policy, many “verified” fake accounts have emerged. According to official statements a paid subscription service has been introduced to increase platform revenues as well as to prevent information irregularity; however, on the contrary, it made the platform more vulnerable to disinformation. The application in question was abolished in April 2023. The takeover and the following changes in the structure have resulted in hot controversies. People have expressed their concerns regarding the possible increase in disinformation and hate speech on the platform. Many advertisers have decided to end their collaborations, citing concerns about content moderation and argued that their brand security may be harmed in a less regulated environment (Voinea, 2022: 139).

Having purchased Twitter and rebranded it as X, Musk began to popularize far-right views on the platform. One key indicator of this has been Musk's lift of ban on previously excluded users, arguing that X should be a global forum for unrestricted freedom of speech. These users include names such as Trump, conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and anti-Islamic activist Tommy Robinson. Musk has also openly supported far-right leaders on the platform, such as Argentinian Javier Milei and Brazilian Jair Bolsonaro - both are Trump fans. Musk's emphasis on "unlimited freedom of speech" has also significantly increased concerns about the platform's capacity to combat issues such as hate speech and disinformation. In addition, Musk's political views, his support for controversial figures, and his platform management style have led to increased criticism (Anderson, 2024).

Elon Musk had a personal meeting with Donald Trump after the assassination attempt on July 13, 2024, and started to support him on the platform X for the 2024 American presidential elections. In the wake of this meeting Trump's personal X account, which was blocked on January 6, 2021, was reactivated. Musk also called on his more than 203 million followers to vote for Trump (Medyatava, 2024). Musk made numerous and regular posts supporting Trump on his personal account until election day. According to a report prepared by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), Musk's posts in favor of Trump received twice as many views as all political ads on the platform combined during the election period. According to the same report, the number of their sightings corresponds to an advertising budget of 24 million dollars on the platform (Euronews, 2024a). Musk's another support for Trump was his promise to distribute \$1 million a day as prizes to people who will be selected among those who register as voters in electoral districts defined as "contested swing" states since they are considered to have a high potential to affect results in presidential elections. The condition for winning the prize is to sign the petition regarding freedom of expression and the rights to bear arms as Musk explicitly gives his support (T24, 2024a).

Musk's posts reached a high level of interaction, and it created controversies about possible interference on algorithms of the platform. There are studies indicating that there has been a sudden increase not only in the number of Musk's personal posts on the platform, but also in the number of views and interactions of his pro-Trump tweets in general. According to Graham and Andrejevic's (2024) research, the interaction of Musk's posts more than doubled due to the suspected algorithm interference. The same research showed that the number of views for Musk's posts increased by 138 percent after July 13, and the number of re-sharings increased by 238 percent. Graham and Andrejevic (2024) emphasized that after the change, Musk's posts "have an increased chance of visibility" compared to posts made from other accounts. The effect of algorithms used on social media platforms in the spread of determined messages makes it easier to target certain segments of society and especially to manipulate voting behavior (İnceoğlu, 2024).

In the 2024 American presidential elections, many technology companies, including Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet and Meta, made donations for candidates' campaigns at various levels. According to data published by Open Secrets, Apple donated \$1.2 million to Harris' campaign, while it contributed only \$52 thousand to Trump. Microsoft contributed \$1.6 million to Harris' campaign. Amazon donated 1.4 million dollars to Harris and 127 thousand dollars to Trump. Alphabet's donations of \$2.8 million and Meta's donations of \$1.15 million contributed to Harris' campaign. On the other hand, Elon Musk made a significant contribution to Donald Trump's campaign by donating approximately 75 million dollars in the last three months of the election process (OpenSecrets, 2024). It is stated that policies such as deregulation and tax cuts, especially in the field of technology, are main reasons for Musk's support for Trump. While Harris and Biden administration advocate for greater regulation of technological developments, Trump's approach of encouraging economic growth and increasing investments by reducing the tax burden for large companies have stood out as policies compatible with Musk's economic goals (Özdemir, 2024).

According to the report of the Pew Research Center (2024), almost half of adults under the age of 30 in the USA follow political news on social media. This shows that Musk's control over X has proved crucial in allowing him to directly interact with voters. Musk's ability to shape online discourse through X shows that he also wields significant influence in the digital public sphere.

## **6. Purpose and Methodology**

### **6.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a mixed-method research design that combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic and discourse analysis. The mixed-method approach enables the systematic identification of dominant patterns in platform content while also allowing for an in-depth interpretation of discursive strategies and symbolic meanings. By integrating quantitative and qualitative

methods, the study aims to examine how platform ownership structures influence political communication and the functioning of the digital public sphere.

## **6.2 Sampling Strategy**

The dataset consists of 407 posts shared by Elon Musk on Platform X between October 30 and November 5, 2024. This time frame corresponds to the final and most intensive phase of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election campaign, during which political communication on social media reached its highest level of visibility and interaction. The selected period allows for an analysis of Musk's discursive interventions at a moment when electoral outcomes were particularly sensitive to agenda-setting, polarization, and algorithmic amplification.

## **6.3 Method of Analysis**

Quantitative content analysis was employed to categorize the posts according to their dominant themes, including media criticism, election integrity, polarization narratives, and the strategic framing of personal investments. In parallel, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring discursive patterns and narrative strategies within Musk's posts. Visual materials such as images, graphics, and videos were analyzed using a basic critical discourse analysis framework, focusing on how visual elements contributed to political framing and symbolic meaning.

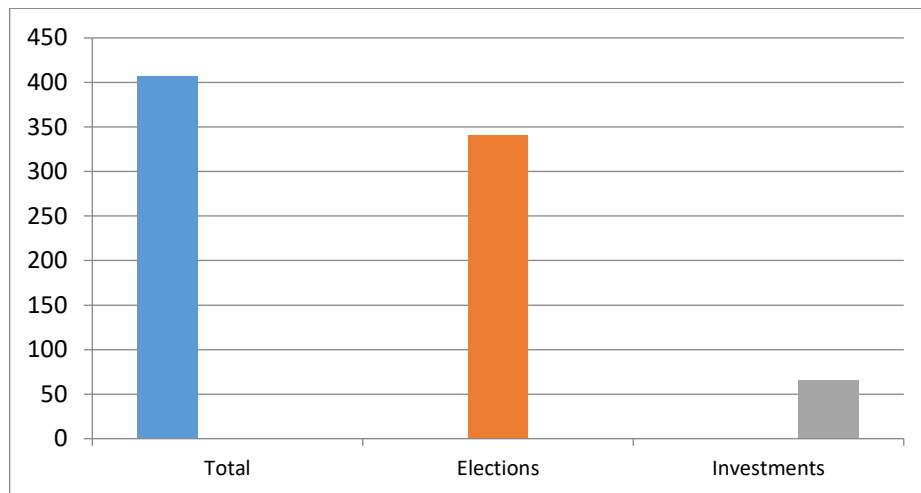
## **6.4 Coding Process and Reliability**

Coding categories were defined prior to analysis based on the theoretical framework of the study and an initial inductive reading of the dataset. All posts were coded by a single researcher to ensure consistency in interpretation. To minimize researcher bias, coding decisions were applied systematically across the dataset and verified through repeated readings of the material. Although inter-coder reliability could not be calculated due to the single-researcher design, methodological transparency and systematic coding procedures were prioritized to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

## **7. Findings and Remarks**

This section includes findings obtained through quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and remarks upon them. In this regard, this study evaluated 407 posts made by Elon Musk on the X between October 30 and November 5, 2024, regarding the US Presidential Election. Clear posts contained significant visual elements (photos, graphics, videos) and had a humorous tone. Chart 1 shows that Musk's posts between dates were largely related to the election process.

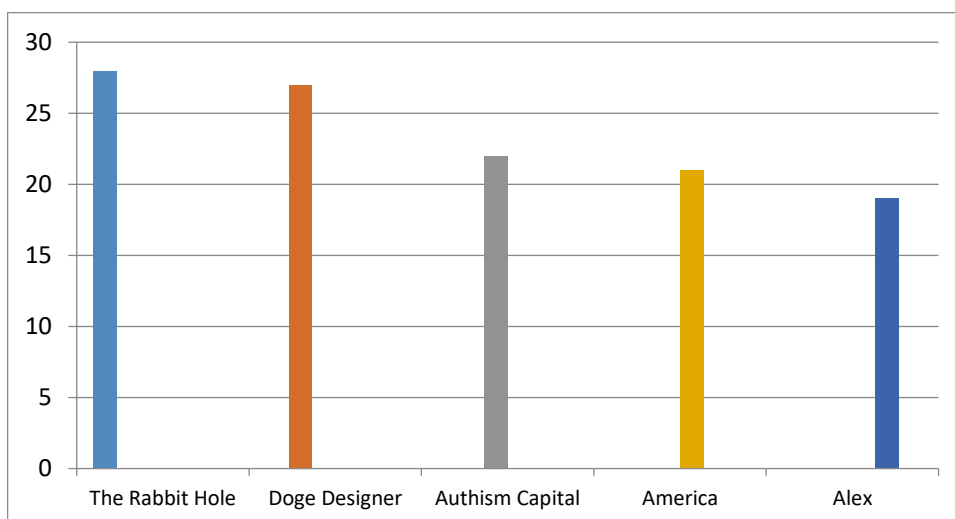
**Chart 1:** Distribution of X posts made by Musk



This distribution demonstrates that Musk’s activity on X during the examined period was predominantly concentrated on election-related themes. This finding supports Fuchs’s argument that visibility in the digital public sphere is unevenly structured by platform power rather than equal participation. The concentration of posts around electoral topics illustrates how platform ownership enables strategic agenda-setting during politically sensitive periods.

As findings demonstrate desired messages are spread and their visibility is increased by Musk, especially his re-sharing those posts through different accounts. The chart below shows 5 X accounts from which Musk retweeted the most throughout the campaign. All of them are right-wing, anti-immigrant and conservative accounts.

**Chart 2: Musk’s most reposted accounts**



The dominance of right-wing, conservative, and anti-immigrant accounts among Musk’s most reposted sources indicates a selective amplification of specific ideological positions. This pattern reflects Habermas’s concept of the re-

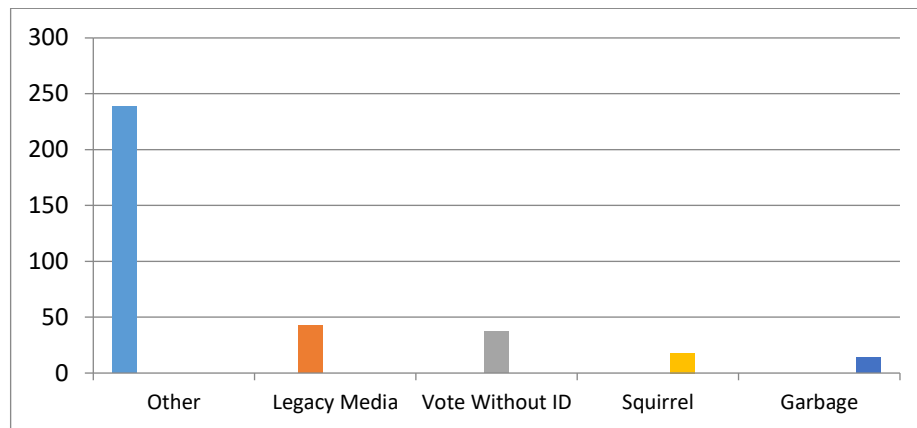
feudalization of the public sphere, in which discourse is shaped by elite actors rather than inclusive deliberation. Algorithmic visibility combined with ownership power reinforces asymmetrical access to public attention.

The prominent topics in Musk's X posts regarding the 2024 US Presidential Election were criticism of traditional media, anonymous voting, the squirrel incident and the garbage debate. The debate started among voters in the state of New York after Mark Longo's pet squirrel Peanut, whom he saved from a car accident 7 years ago, was taken away by state authorities and killed due to fear of rabies. Elon Musk shared the photo of the squirrel on X and said, "President Donald Trump will save squirrels. He helped spread the issue by sharing a post saying, *"Rest in peace, P'Nut."* Instead of fighting real crimes in Democrat-run states, he kept this issue on the agenda throughout the campaign with claims that animals were being targeted.

The event, publicly known as the "garbage debate", started when comedian Tony Hinchcliffe proclaimed from the podium at Trump's rally as follows: *"There is literally an island of garbage floating in the middle of the ocean right now. I think its name is Puerto Rico."* This speech could have been beneficial for democrats; however, when Joe Biden participated in a meeting for Latin electorate via video-call he created an adversary atmosphere with these explanations: *"At Trump's rally, a speaker called Puerto Rico a 'floating garbage island'... The only garbage I see outside is his supporters. His demonization of Latinos is unconscionable and un-American."* Both Trump and Musk used this statement frequently throughout the campaign on the grounds that it insulted Republican voters.

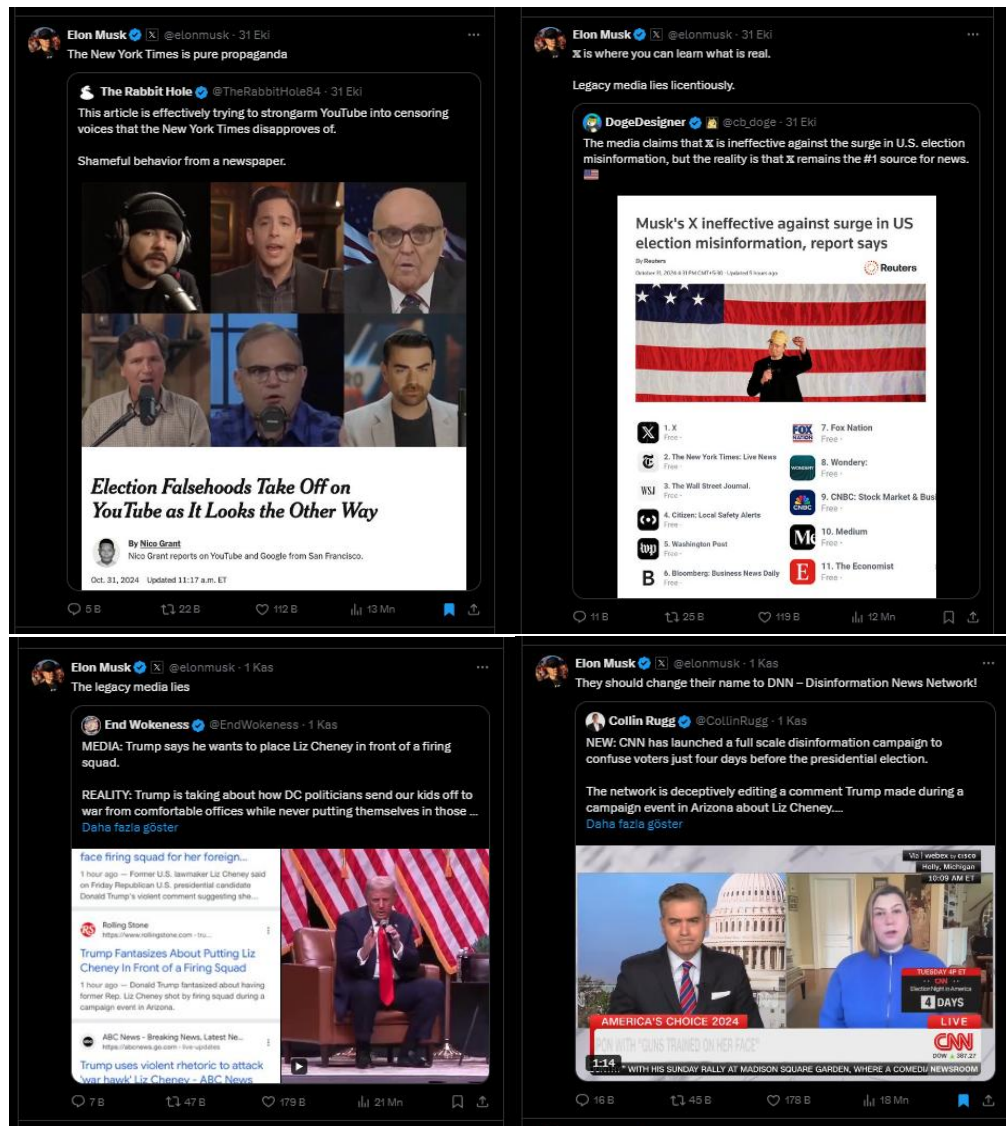
The "other" category in the chart includes encouragement to voting in an earlier time, re-sharing of posts by other users who support Trump, photos of people who received \$1 million prize, videos he shot for support, and critiques against Kamala-Biden administration. In his posts, Musk often describes media channels or traditional media as he prefers to use, as "liars" and "censors". In addition to his posts criticizing traditional media throughout the examined period, he defined X as a medium of freedom of expression; he frequently includes posts urging users to follow the news and especially the election process on X. Criticizing traditional media, Musk supported citizen journalism with his posts on the platform: *"Citizen journalism is the path to a better future"* and *"Citizen journalism can make this world a better place."* Although he accused the traditional media of lying, he published a voice recording that he claimed belonged to Kamala Harris on X without stating that it was a parody. In the shared video, Harris says, *"I am Kamala Harris. I'm your Democratic presidential candidate. Because Joe Biden finally revealed his senility in the debate."*

### **Chart 3: Topics related to Musk's X posts**



The thematic distribution of Musk’s posts reveals a strong emphasis on polarizing issues rather than policy-oriented debate. This finding aligns with critical political economy arguments that digital platforms prioritize emotionally charged and antagonistic content to maximize engagement. As a result, rational-critical discussion is displaced by strategic framing and conflict-driven communication.

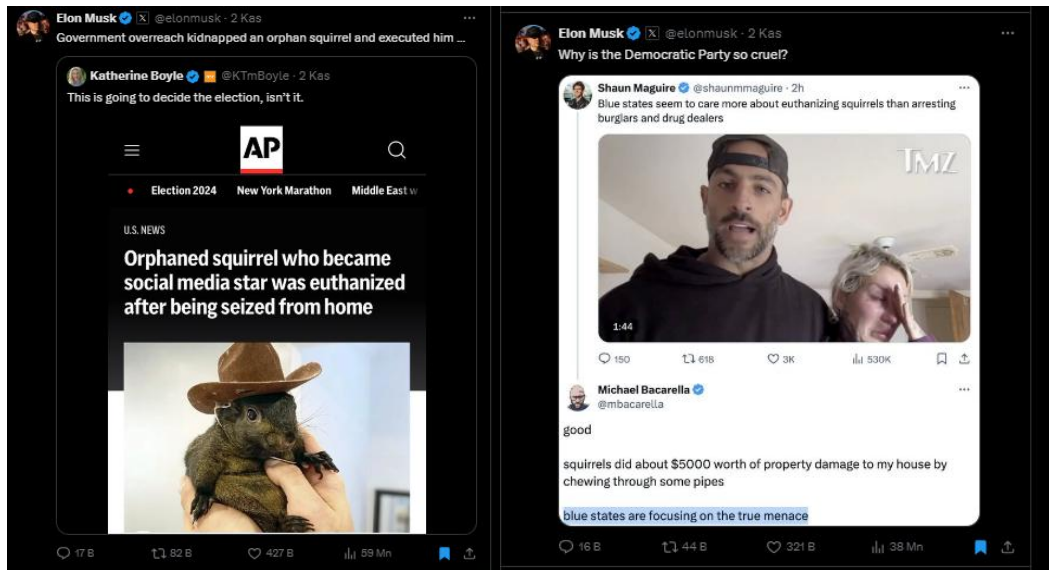
**Figure 1:** Musk's posts regarding traditional media criticism



Musk's repeated framing of traditional media as "liars" and "censors" functions as a delegitimization strategy that redirects trust toward the platform he owns. This supports the argument that platform ownership enables the construction of alternative centers of symbolic authority within the digital public sphere. Such practices further weaken the role of independent journalism in democratic communication.

As below images exemplify, Musk brought up the squirrel issue extensively through X. Musk took this incident as an opportunity and tried to develop an opposing discourse, especially after Trump was called as a fascist, accused the Democratic administration of cruelty and animal hostility. Musk shared 18 X posts specifically about the squirrel incident.

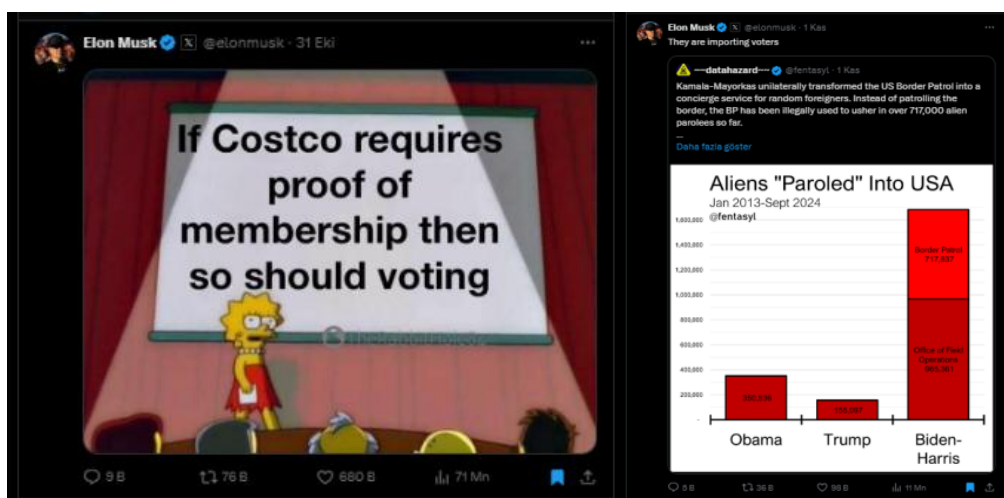
**Figure 2:** Musk's posts regarding the squirrel incident



The extensive use of the squirrel incident illustrates how emotionally charged and symbolic narratives can be mobilized for political polarization. Rather than contributing to substantive public debate, such content operates as a distraction mechanism that reinforces affective engagement. This dynamic exemplifies how the digital public sphere is reshaped through spectacle and personalization.

One of the most overemphasized issues in the US public during the election process was immigration policies of candidates. Interestingly, Musk did not engage in an open discussion on this issue, yet he brought up the issue by drawing people's attention to the voting of people who are not eligible to vote. He made 27 unverified posts blaming Democrats for anonymous voting.

**Figure 3:** Musk's posts regarding anonymous voting

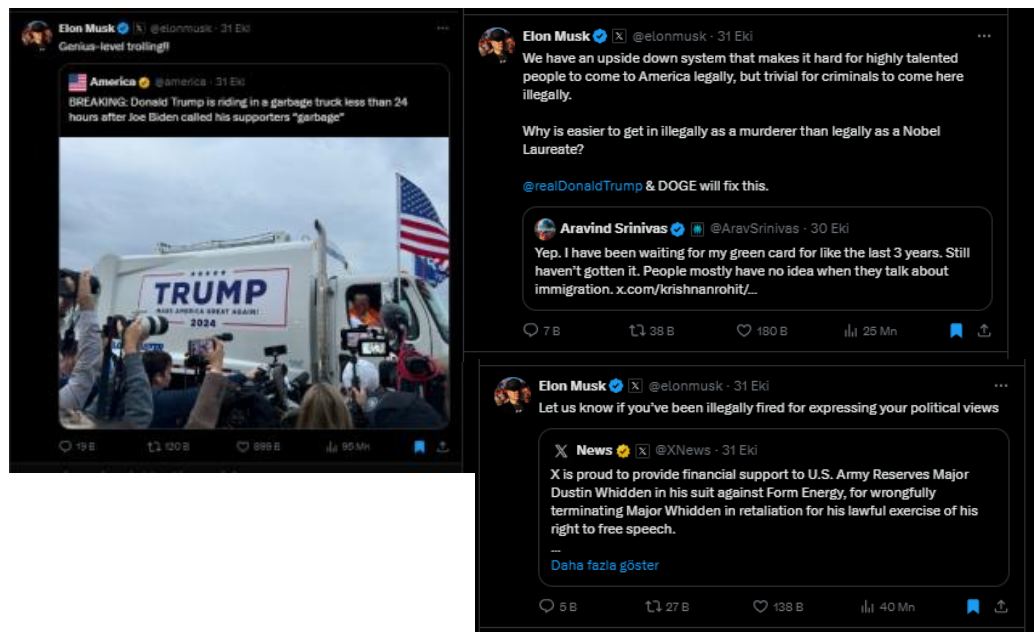




Musk's emphasis on anonymous voting claims, despite the lack of verification, demonstrates the role of platform power in normalizing contested narratives. This pattern highlights how algorithmic amplification can facilitate the circulation of unverified information. Consequently, the normative foundations of trust and rational debate within the public sphere are undermined.

The term "garbage", which Biden used for Republican voters during the election process, was another significant issue that Musk tried to keep on the agenda for a long time on X. This event created an opportunity for polarization, and Trump supporters tried to capitalize on this polarization to consolidate their voters to their maximum benefit. Unlike other posts in which Musk criticized the Democratic Party administration over the garbage incident, he shared supportive posts with images of Trump's election trip with a garbage truck.

**Figure 4:** Musk's posts regarding the “garbage incident”



The framing of the “garbage incident” exemplifies how polarizing rhetoric is strategically sustained to consolidate political identities. This supports the argument that platform-mediated communication often prioritizes antagonism over deliberation. Such practices contribute to the fragmentation of the public sphere into opposing camps rather than fostering dialogue.

Apart from these prominent topics, Musk consistently shared posts on topics such as controversial-swing states and the debate between men and women. He also linked his personal investments such as SpaceX and Tesla with the election process and presented them as critical initiatives for the future of the USA and American people. Tellingly through his posts Musk attempted to create a positive relationship between Trump's triumph and the voyage to Mars.

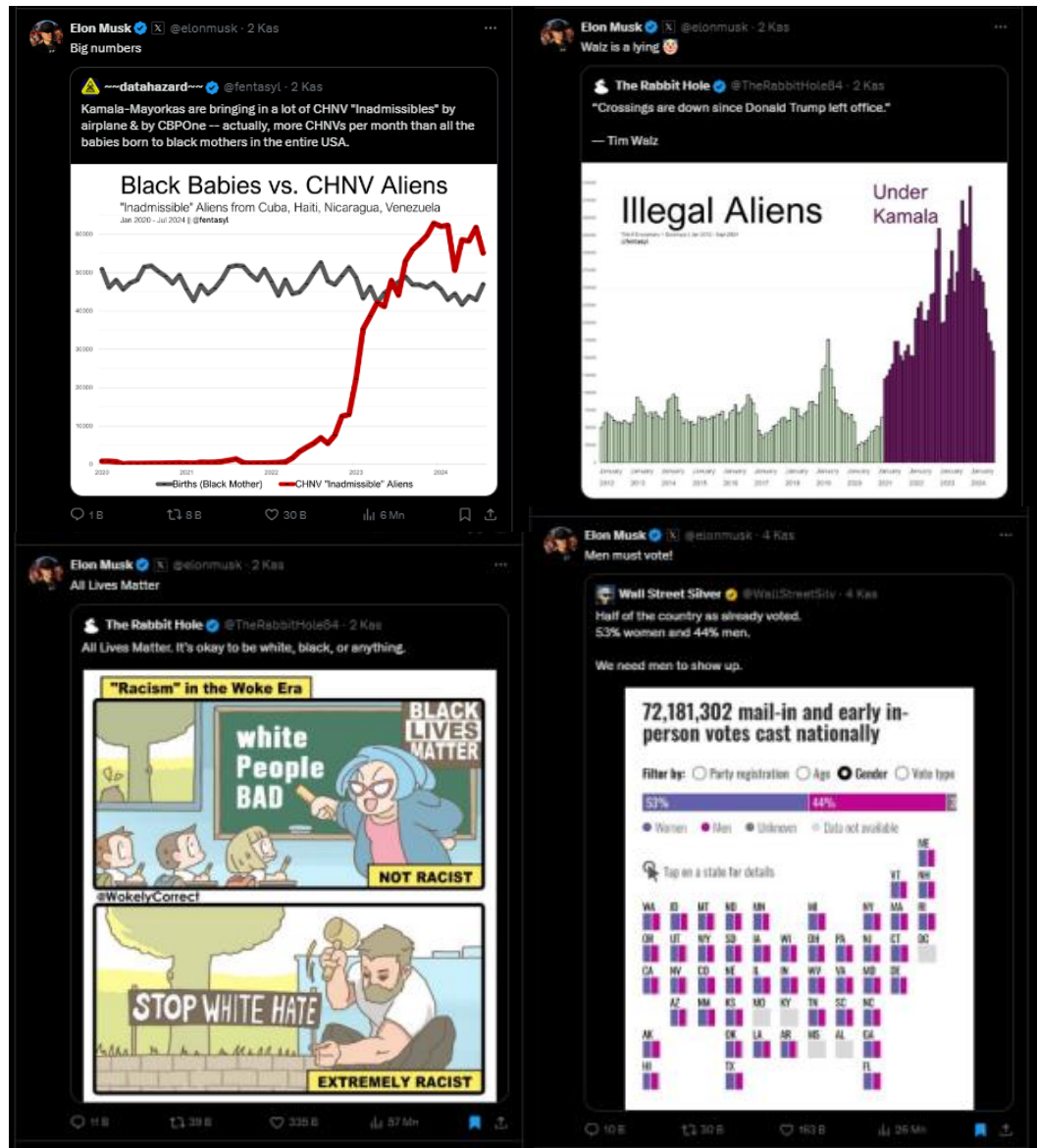
**Figure 5:** Examples from Musk's other posts



The association of Musk’s personal investments with national progress narratives reflects the intertwining of economic interests and political communication. This finding supports critical political economic claims that platform owners can leverage symbolic power to legitimize private accumulation as public benefit. As a result, economic power is translated into discursive influence.

Musk also shared posts on X in which he invited male voters to the ballot box. It could be considered as a move against Kamala Harris's campaign targeting women. Similarly, he appealed to voters through xenophobia and encouraged people to re-discuss racist incidents happened during the Democratic Party administration.

**Figure 6:** Examples from Musk's other posts



Posts targeting gender divisions and xenophobic themes illustrate how identity-based appeals are mobilized to shape voter behavior. This pattern aligns with critiques of digital platforms as environments that intensify social polarization. The public sphere thus becomes a space of emotional mobilization rather than collective reasoning.

In the light of theoretical framework of the study and its findings it is worth emphasizing that Musk tried to add value to his personal investments by creating an illusion of social benefit. Aims to protect commercial investments, increase capital accumulation, and expand the area of exploitation through power relations are achieved through the power provided by the ownership of social media platform

ownership; far from being a platform for freedom of expression and public sphere, social media is subject to a process of monopolization. And this fact, as it is stated as the fundamental problem above supports the assumption that new media monopolies, which emerged with digitization, reproduce power relations over information rather than democratization. Musk's call to vote and his post after Trump won the election make it necessary to reevaluate any arguments that defend social media as the constitutive part of a democratic public sphere.

**Figure 7:** Examples from Musk's other posts



These examples further demonstrate the personalization of political communication under platform ownership. Musk's posts blur the boundaries between individual opinion, corporate power, and political influence. This convergence exemplifies how the digital public sphere is increasingly structured around private authority.

## 8. Conclusion

The widespread assumption that the internet and social media inherently create democratic public spaces overlooks the capacity of these environments to reproduce and intensify power relations embedded in capitalist social structures. The expansion of digital platforms has coincided with an unprecedented concentration of media ownership, transforming communication infrastructures into instruments of economic accumulation and political influence. Rather than fostering inclusive deliberation, digital media increasingly operates under the logic of commodification, surveillance, and algorithmic control.

This study has demonstrated that the transformation of Twitter following Elon Musk's acquisition exemplifies the re-feudalization of the public sphere. As a privately owned platform, X enables its owner to shape political discourse through selective amplification, agenda-setting, and the strategic use of algorithmic visibility. The analysis of Musk's posts during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

illustrates how platform ownership allows private economic power to be translated into discursive and political influence, thereby undermining the normative foundations of the public sphere based on rational-critical debate and equal participation.

The findings further suggest that claims emphasizing social media as neutral arenas of free expression fail to account for the structural constraints imposed by ownership concentration and profit-oriented business models. Algorithmic governance, combined with monopolistic control, fragments public discourse into polarized and antagonistic spheres, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and weakening the deliberate function of the public sphere.

In this respect, the case of Platform X highlights the need to reassess optimistic narratives surrounding digital media and democracy. The public sphere, while still formally present in digital environments, is increasingly shaped by private authority rather than public interest. This transformation raises fundamental questions about media ownership, accountability, and democratic communication in the digital age.

Future research could comparatively examine how similar ownership dynamics shape public discourse across different platforms such as TikTok, Threads, or YouTube, particularly during election periods.

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