

Welcome to Elon Musk's Casino

Written by Administrator

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Recently, comedy clubs have begun doing this thing that seemed, when I first encountered it, both wildly hypocritical and more than a little sad.

I first noticed this new phenomenon at the Comedy Cellar, in Manhattan's West Village. The Cellar, which was more or less my second home during my early 30s, is a warm and intimate-to-the-point-of-claustrophobia club that I have loved unconditionally. So it was particularly distressing the first time I saw a bouncer distributing padded envelopes and insisting people seal their phones inside them before entering.

The club's rationale had to do with Twitter, and with YouTube, and with the rest of the social web. Comics were worried about being taped surreptitiously, going viral against their will, and then getting canceled. I understood that the stakes seemed ferociously high, but the idea that the answer to this challenge was to literally bubble-wrap people's iPhones seemed absurd.

My view was simple: If you don't want people to hear your jokes, don't tell them. Comedy is, at its core, about revealing truths—all truths, including nasty, taboo truths. And many comedians share the view that no topic is off-limits so long as it can be made funny. Why would comedians, of all people, accept such defeat? That they would tolerate turning the Cellar into some kind of SCIF struck me as not only somewhat pathetic but a dire threat to the art of comedy itself.

I was not above mocking the comics I know about this new practice. But I did come to understand the complexity: Like everyone else, comedians must assume that, when in public, they are being recorded for internet distribution. They were accustomed to having the time and space for their art to ripen while performing in private clubs, and suddenly found themselves exposed before a global audience. Just the way the social web has flattened and homogenized culture, it has warped the purpose of the comedy club.

[Imani Perry: Can Twitter's failings spur a better social media?](#)

This is what I've been thinking about as I've watched Elon Musk treat Twitter as a comedy club on the one hand, and the universal town square on the other. What he doesn't seem to realize is that it is neither.

A comedy club is the dojo of stand-up. It is where comics get their reps, where they go to test their jokes—and very often their most objectionable and least-developed material—in front of a live audience. Stand-up in this setting is not meant to scale. Just the opposite: Its intimacy and ephemerality are its magic. Save the polished material for your Netflix special. The Cellar is where you can get dark and experimental. You might know something is funny intellectually when you write it, but you don't *really* know without the reaction of a live audience. It's where you feed off the energy of the room, and develop a feel for the exact moment when the crowd will turn on you. And the audience is self-selecting—the people who show up are likely to understand the purpose and value of stand-up in the first place. Drunks and hecklers pop up now and again, but you know they'll either be chastened by the crowd or get kicked out.

Almost needless to say, this is not how the internet works.

I eventually came to understand that the Cellar, with its padded envelopes, was not just treating its comics like snowflakes, but actually trying to do something honorable by clearly defining its purpose to everyone who walked in the door. The comedy club exists for the comics, not the customers, and it prioritizes protecting artists. (One famous comedian who performs regularly at the Cellar talked with me at length about what the social web has done to comedy, but only on the condition that I wouldn't quote him. He said he'd rather have me quote what he'd said about the subject in one of his streaming specials, as if to underscore the point.)

A platform like Twitter is the opposite of a comedy club. It is always on, overflowing with material, agnostic (at best) about quality, and designed for scale. The people hanging out there are disaggregated geographically. Instead of laughter, you get retweets—silent and ambiguous, deployed to convey both appreciation and disgust. And despite the impression of fleetingness that an endless stream of tweets might suggest, you should always assume that what you do on the social web is being widely seen, magnified immediately, and documented forever. Most stand-up routines age poorly because they are made for the moment. Most stand-up is not *supposed*

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to age well. That is because it's not supposed to age at all.

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Musk sometimes appears to believe that he bought a \$44 billion dojo, a place where the funniest person in the room wins the day through force of provocation and charisma. Musk is a self-described free-speech absolutist, so I can see why he would make this mistake. Twitter may be the anti-comedy club, but it is not without humor. The platform has been a wonderful nursery for rising comics, and for irreverence generally. Twitter has launched a not-insignificant number of careers in comedic writing, and plenty of weirdos with decent jokes have found and entertained new and niche audiences there. Twitter has its own in-group language, and has inculcated numerous new joke formats, for better and for worse. Most jokes aren't for everyone, but that's what the "unfollow" button is for.

Musk clearly likes trying to make people laugh. His own presence on the platform is often puckish. One of the first things he tweeted after finalizing his acquisition of the company was this: "Comedy is now legal on Twitter." In the days that followed, Twitter became noisy with people impersonating Musk, mocking him for his idea of a new pay-to-play identity-verification system. Twitter users changed their display names to "Elon Musk," some adopting his profile photo, in many cases intending to show how easy it would be to imitate someone and spread disinformation if a blue checkmark meant to authenticate someone's identity could simply be purchased. It took less than two weeks for "Comedy is now legal" to morph into: "Going forward, any Twitter handles engaging in impersonation without clearly specifying 'parody' will be permanently suspended."

People are rightly calling out Musk for how easily he folded on his free-speech absolutism. Comedy purists scoff at the idea that satire should ever be labeled. What all this reveals, though, is not just that Musk is a hypocrite, or that he is in over his head, but that he hasn't decided what Twitter actually *is*. If a comedy club is a dojo for comics, and Twitter is the anti-comedy club, what and who is Musk's social platform for?

After announcing his crackdown on unlabeled comedy, he tweeted this: "Twitter needs to become by far the most accurate source of information about the world. That's our mission." By that definition, Twitter is a news organization, I suppose, but one led by someone antagonistic to the idea that journalists are members of a trained, skilled professional class. Musk also tweeted on Sunday night that "journalists who think they are the only source of legitimate

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information” are engaged in perpetrating “the big lie.” For what it’s worth, I don’t know any journalist who believes that they are the only source of legitimate information. In the past, Musk has floated the idea of having people upvote their perception of what is true as a way to assess news outlets, launching a “credibility-ranking site for people to rate journalists and news organizations.” He once dismissed [my criticism](#) of this idea by suggesting that he had more journalism experience than I do. (He does not.) “Spent years in newsrooms starting 23 years ago,” he [tweeted](#) at the time, “back when some reporters were still babies w pooppy diapers.”

All this from a man who repeatedly uses Twitter to distribute conspiracy theories in earnest, [including as recently as last month](#). Cynics will tell you that Musk has decided exactly what Twitter is—primarily a vehicle for advertising revenue—and they’re most likely right. It’s no coincidence that as soon as it became clear that doubling down on free speech was scaring off big advertisers, Musk hyped aggressive moderation tactics instead. Then again, he also [tweeted](#) out a meme featuring a Nazi soldier. So who really knows.

[Read: Elon Musk's disastrous weekend on Twitter](#)

One of the most nefarious aspects of the social web is that the major platforms do such a good job of approximating our idea of the public sphere that people sometimes forget that walled gardens are not actually public spaces. Twitter users may feel like they’re in a digital town square, engaging in civic conversation, and you can understand why. The utopian ideal of the social web is indeed captivating; the internet was supposed to be a global force for democratization, a place where every individual could exercise the right to free expression without friction. Musk himself has put it this way: “Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated.”

In fact, Twitter is more like a casino—a private establishment where everyone is mingling, including the billionaire owner. And yet culturally, and because of how people actually use Twitter, the lines between “comedy club” and “town square” and “room full of monetizable user data that drive advertising revenue” aren’t always apparent. This disconnect ends up feeling most pronounced when the values of Twitter-the-casino bump up against the values, like freedom of speech, that Americans typically associate with public life and its attendant constitutional protections against government overreach.

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But Twitter is not an adequate town square, most obviously because the world's centers of public discourse should not be run by businessmen. Musk is, of course, free to run his platform however he wants. But Twitter is not a public good. No one has a right to it. Musk can and should kick out whomever he chooses, just the way a casino owner can. And if people don't like how he's running things, they are free to leave. Musk wields tremendous power as the person shaping the future of a hugely influential global self-publishing platform. But he's not a head of state, and we should be wary of acting like he is one. Cracking down on comedy only makes him culturally—not *actually*—like the police going after Lenny Bruce. Because all he can do is kick people out of his casino. He can't throw anyone in jail.

Bruce was first arrested for obscenity in San Francisco in October 1961, for having used “a ten-letter word onstage,” as Bruce later referred to it in his autobiography. (That word, by the way, was *cocksucker*.) Bruce kept getting arrested and kept performing anyway. He would be arrested several more times for obscenity before eventually being sentenced to four months in a workhouse in 1964. This is what an actual fight for free speech entails—risking your livelihood, and maybe your life, no matter how many times the government tries to stop you. Bruce died of a drug overdose in 1966, before he could fully appeal or serve his sentence.

We can only ever imagine what a mind like Bruce's (or Rod Serling's or George Carlin's) would have made of the social web. But I'm fairly certain that Bruce would have found Twitter both amusing and horrifying. Amusing, because he found chaos to be irresistible. “Confusion was entertainment for me,” he once wrote, waxing nostalgic about “a freezing blizzard that would stop all traffic and mail; toilets that would get stopped up and overflow and run down the halls; electrical failures—anything that would stop the flow and make it back up and find a new direction.”

Bruce was also, like so many comics and so many journalists, inescapably optimistic and deeply cynical at the same time, or as the theater critic Kenneth Tynan once put it, “a tightrope walker between morality and nihilism.” Bruce loved that comedy was an anti-establishment craft—neither a skill for which you could be accredited, nor a formula that just anyone could follow. He also relished telling uncomfortable truths—sometimes about pissing in the sink or Eleanor Roosevelt's breasts, the latter being the impetus for one of his arrests—but always in the face of society's most powerful, deceptive, and hypocritical figures and forces. Consider the testimony of the jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason, then a columnist at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in defense of Bruce at his San Francisco obscenity trial: “Mr. Bruce attacks the fundamental structure of society and these other comedians deal with it superficially.”

Bruce had a way of cutting straight to the heart of the thing, and one can only assume he would

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have seen through Musk instantly. Here he is, the richest man in the world, trying to convince people that his newly acquired virtual casino is actually the people's town square. Here he is trying to monetize civic participation. Here he is telling people what they can and can't say for a laugh. Here he is charging them \$8 a pop for the privilege. There is most definitely a 10-letter word for that.

Sometime between Bruce's obscenity trials in Los Angeles and New York, a group of novelists, actors, artists, and journalists—including Bob Dylan, James Baldwin, Lillian Hellman, Elizabeth Taylor, George Plimpton, John Updike, and many more—signed a letter arguing for the protection of satire in the United States. They placed Bruce in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, François Rabelais, and Mark Twain. "Whether we regard Bruce as a moral spokesman or simply as an entertainer," they wrote, "we believe he should be allowed to perform free from censorship or harassment."

Theirs was a simpler world, in the sense that this all took place before the existence of the web, before most of us carried around pocket computers that have to be bubble-wrapped before they'll let you hear a joke at a comedy club. But it was a more complicated world, too. Comedians faced actual censorship. Police officers threw Lenny Bruce in jail for schoolyard humor. Back then, a filthy joke got you arrested, not just kicked off some billionaire's vanity project for mega-nerds.

Musk now decides what Twitter is, and who it is for. And why wouldn't he? He owns the place. People can decide for themselves whether they want to hang out there anymore, whether it does more net good or net harm for individuals and for society. Lenny Bruce once wrote that his inspiration in comedy was only every second of his entire life, nothing more and nothing less. What he meant, I think, was that he lived with eyes wide open. He tried to see things as they actually were, and avoided clouding his vision with good-sounding intentions or empty promises or the hypocrisy of the powerful. "There is only what *is*," he wrote. "The *what-should-be* never did exist, but people keep trying to live up to it."

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