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## 'You are where you post': Changing identities through online social networks

### »Si tisto, kjer objavljaš«: spreminjanje identitet na spletnih družbenih omrežjih

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This paper examines identity change through online social networks, using personal experiences as the research lens. The author discusses the transition from observer to active participant, highlighting in particular the challenges he faced when deleting his Twitter profile. Through a detailed analysis of the process, the chapter explores the preparations for 'digital suicide', the reactions of the online community and beyond to this act, and the lasting effects of adopting a new digital persona on alternative platforms. This narrative of the paper highlights the complex relationship between 'online' and 'offline' identities and offers insights into self-renewal and changing identities in the digital age.

• **Keywords:** online social networks, digital age, changing identities, Twitter, Mastodon, Threads

Članek obravnava spreminjanje identitete prek spletnih družabnih omrežij, pri čemer kot raziskovalni objektiv uporablja osebne izkušnje. Avtor obravnava prehod od opazovalca do aktivnega udeleženca, pri čemer izpostavlja zlasti izzive, s katerimi se je soočil pri brisanju svojega profila na Twitterju. S podrobno analizo procesa poglavje raziskuje priprave na „digitalni samomor“, odzive spletne skupnosti in širše na to dejanje ter trajne učinke sprejetja nove digitalne osebe na alternativnih platformah. Ta pripovedni del članka poudarja zapleteno razmerje med „spletnimi“ in „nespletnimi“ identitetami ter ponuja vpogled v samoobnovo in spreminjanje identitet v digitalni dobi.

• **Ključne besede:** spletna družbena omrežja, digitalna doba, spreminjanje identitet, Twitter, Mastodon, Threads

## 1 Introduction

In 2007, I created a Twitter account and posted a few experimental texts, which didn't garner any engagement. This was followed by several years of inactivity. I occasionally tried to revive my profile by posting from time to time, to no effect, until 2020, which brought a turning point. I started to post more and my posts subsequently led to more engagement. I realised they were becoming more and more resounding, read and shared by an increasing number of users, so I started posting even more – which led to even more engagement and followers. Simultaneously, and lacking an in-depth qualitative analysis along the lines of the one my colleague Ajda Pretnar Žagar and I carried out on the Instagram profile of the former Slovenian president, Borut Pahor (Podjed, Pretnar 2018; Podjed 2019: 81–88), I was learning about which posts attracted the most attention, were the most interesting, most shared and most wanted. Appeasing and gentle comments rarely fit into this category, unlike harsher and more combative,

cynical and sarcastic ones. Since such posts were met with the most digital ‘applause’ in the form of shares and likes, I continued the practice of posting captivating content while concurrently realising that the point was not only in their quality, but also in their quantity. More posts meant more comments, which I attempted to answer regularly, rejected the ones contradicting my statements, and supported the ones defending them.

After two and a half years of rigorous posting, I found Twitter increasingly captivating and repulsive at the same time. I removed a growing number of irritating commentators, who were corroding my daily life with insults and sarcastic remarks, from my ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser 2011), by either silencing them, that’s to say using the *mute* option to insure I could no longer see what others were writing about me, or by blocking them, thus preventing them from seeing my own posts, while I stopped following their posts, as well.

This paper focuses on the process of leaving the Twitter network, renamed to X in 2023, explains the community’s reactions both online and offline, and identifies long-term consequences of terminating a digital persona and moving to other platforms, with special emphasis on the take-over of Twitter by billionaire Elon Musk in the period from 2022 to 2023, and also describes subsequent changes of the network itself and the people constituting it.

## 2 The beginning of technofeudalism

The middle of 2022 saw the start of a change in the shareholders of Twitter. In April of that year, Elon Musk, one of the richest people on Earth, announced the take-over of the network. The *Twittersphere*, i.e. Twitter’s active users, burst with unease, much more so in October of that year, when the announcement was realised. For 44 billion dollars, he had bought a network with approximately 400 million ‘souls’ at the time, although many of them were – in the words of Gogol’s novel – ‘dead souls’, i.e. fake accounts and so-called *bots*, user profiles managed by programmes instead of real people. At that moment, the actual value of an individual user of the network became clear: it was around one hundred Euros. That was the amount of money the magnate had bought his own kingdom for and transformed into the ‘king of our digital world’, as I commented in an article published by the *Delo* newspaper at the time of Musk’s take-over (Be. B. 2022). I was alluding to Yanis Varoufakis’s writing (2021, 2023) on ‘technofeudalism’, where he explained that in neo-feudal economy – unlike in capitalism – all social, political and, most importantly, economic power falls into the hands of a small, yet extraordinarily influential elite, which has total power and control over the markets. Analysing the operations of online giants like Meta, Amazon and Google, Varoufakis finds that the digital ‘scenes’ created by these elites will become even more concerned with the needs and wants of individuals or groups of selected few. This will

de facto end any semblance of (neo)liberal or free trade markets, pushing them toward feudal markets with strict executive control over all activities and transactions (cf. Podjed 2022a). In one of his articles, Varoufakis articulated this transition from one system to the next as follows: 'This is how capitalism ends: not with a revolutionary bang, but with an evolutionary whimper. Just as it displaced feudalism gradually, surreptitiously, until one day the bulk of human relations were market-based and feudalism was swept away, so capitalism is today being toppled by a new economic mode: techno-feudalism' (Varoufakis 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Musk's over-taking of Twitter was a clear sign that the new social-economic system was actually on the horizon – or already underway, without a bang. For it was one man who, almost overnight, took the reign over the entire digital 'kingdom', i.e. an online social network, and assumed control over every decision concerning the way this community cohabited. He even decided on renaming an entire digital world, from Twitter to X, which happened in June 2023, and simultaneously changed the typical colour scheme, replacing the blue and white one with black and white, while a black letter X forced out the logo of a blue tweeting bird. Musk introduced numerous changes to the network, in order to better align it with his value system, style of thinking and managing companies, as well as his general way of living and reigning (for more on this see Isaacson 2023). He began, among other things, stressing the importance of 'freedom of speech', using it as grounds for reinstating profiles of individuals formerly blocked by Twitter, including the controversial rapper Kanye West, who officially assumed the name Ye in 2021, and the former American president Donald Trump, whose posting was disabled after inciting rioters in front of the Capitol building in January 2021. Prior to the 'reviving' of Trump's profile, Musk posted a poll on his Twitter account, asking the community whether the former American president should be given another chance. As it turned out, the majority, specifically 51.8 percent of approximately 15 million voters, supported the idea, and Elon Musk tweeted: 'The people have spoken. Trump will be reinstated.' He added a weighty Latin saying: '*Vox Populi, Vox Dei.*' One of the first written mentions of this saying is related to English scholar and clergyman Alcuin (735–804), who mentioned the following in one of his letters: '*Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, Vox populi, vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit.*' In short, he was of the opinion that the people who keep saying the voice of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'technofeudalism' by Varoufakis might be exciting, but disputable in many aspects and calls for further questioning and analysis of the current situation (see e.g. Krašovec 2021) and past socio-economic systems. One of the problems is that the new system really doesn't include some of the basic elements of 'old' feudalism, among them compulsory labour and handing over tributes, although – as I discussed elsewhere (e.g. Podjed 2022a) – one could see the use of smart phones and other devices as far from voluntary. For this reason, it might be a good idea to further discuss the role of data-serfs. Constant surrendering of data with the help of 'addictive' technological solutions (Alter 2017; Eyal 2019; Hari 2022) facilitating connections and communication, which are in fact comparable with tracking and listening devices (Podjed 2019), as these people labour daily on digital platforms and, with the help of technological solutions, keep expanding the wealth of a select few, who are getting rich through collecting and managing data.

people is the voice of God should not be listened to, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness (Yeo 2022). Interestingly, when used in contemporary contexts, the phrase highlights the opposite of the original thought. Of late, the people are always right, so the ruler must follow. The voice of the people is supposedly the ‘voice of God’, but in the case of Musk apparently only as long as ‘god’ concurs with this ‘voice’. This naturally begs the question of who has actually taken over god’s role in the case of today’s X network, previously known as Twitter? Has the role of god in an online form of quasi-democracy been taken over by the people, who even have the power to revive ‘dead souls’? Or has god’s and therefore all-knowing and all-seeing position been occupied by the network’s owner, i.e. Elon Musk? Judging from actions that have followed, one could conclude that the latter is the correct answer. Musk, a self-proclaimed ‘free speech absolutist’ in the past, removed rapper Kanye West’s profile from his network in December 2022, following a series of anti-Semitic posts and statements. However, West’s profile had been blocked several weeks prior, in October 2022, but was later once again allowed to post. The final straw was a post of the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism, merged with a Nazi symbol – the swastika. At that point, Kanye West was deleted. Eight months later, the rapper under a new name of Ye was ‘reincarnated’ on the also newly named network, X, the difference being that his new digital existence no longer depended on the will of the ‘people’, i.e. ‘*populous*’, but the final say was left to *Deus* himself, i.e. Elon Musk in the role of god and arbiter.

### 3 Schismogenesis online

The arrival of a new ‘king’, Elon Musk, who bought his own kingdom, subjects included, certainly contributed to my thinking about deleting my Twitter account. I was also annoyed with ceaseless harassment and taunting by those who obviously shared neither my ideologies nor my ideas online. But these two reasons alone were not enough for deletion and self-abolition. I was fundamentally more bothered by something that remained hidden, yet was extremely harmful to our society: division among people, who could perhaps coexist in the physical world, but seemed to hate each other’s guts in the digital one. I articulated this in an article published by the *Večer* newspaper:

Division of people into groups, yelping at one another like rabid dogs through wire fencing, is not a mere coincidence but rather the essence of a business model behind online social networks, based on tribalisation, i.e. division into ours and yours, good and bad, left and right. Remaining moderate and neutral on Twitter is a nearly impossible task, as others put you in a position, where you have to defend and uphold your own statements, no matter how benign. In short, one is guilty of existing. (Podjed 2022)

As I attempted to explain later on in the abovementioned commentary, separated and isolated communities, which had been forming on Twitter, were an excellent example

of *schismogenesis*, a phenomenon first defined by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the 1930s while analysing social behaviour of an ethnic group in New Guinea, whose members strived to differentiate as much as possible from members within the same group, perceived as inferior or as opponents. According to Bateson (1935, 1999), such focusing on differences and emphasizing one's own superiority both in words and in actions, even in style of clothing, leads to a rift in a community. Such a rift had been – by the looks of it – also happening on Twitter, where Slovenian users started to transform into 'Slevenci' (left-leaning Slovenians) and 'Sdesnenci' (right-leaning Slovenians), based on their alleged political positions and preferences, as I stated in my commentary for the *Večer* newspaper, or even into more tribal-sounding 'Levuharji' (for left-leaning individuals) and 'Desnosučne' (for right-leaning individuals) (Podjed 2022). As I added, they 'were standing on opposite sides, targeting one another with verbal spears, occasionally penetrating the digital fabric and breaking through into the physical world' (ibid.). This war, waged mostly verbally on the former Twitter, currently X, and other social networks, of course, validated social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's hypothesis, presented in his book *The Righteous Mind*, namely that we're increasingly turning away from looking for our opponents outside of our community, finding them within instead. A liberal citizen's worst enemy is thus one who defends conservative values in their own country – and vice versa. The fact that we are part of the same ideational community, the same nation, is thus slowly falling into oblivion. Which side of the ideology spectrum we are on has become more important (Haidt 2012).

Dividing people into groups which get angry with each other and bombard each other with insults is more than just a coincidence, it is actually the essence of the business model behind online social media, based on tribalisation. Schismogenesis is at the heart of tribalisation, as is the rule saying that 'we are not them'. Schismogenesis, or deepening of divisions among different groups, has been accelerated by algorithms and ensured broader exposure to the most contentious posts, i.e. the searing, offensive and hatred stimulating ones. In this way, an online network merely imitates and bolsters 'algorithms' already in people's minds. Every one of us notices posts which stand out from the crowd first, and these are usually shocking, surprising and, naturally, bursting with hatred towards the other side. When people come across such posts, they more often than not write a vexed comment, like or share the post themselves. And the vicious circle of mutual hatred continues, gaps in a community widen, and people demonise each other further, at the same time turning into demons in their own 'echo chamber', which gradually transforms into an 'epistemic bubble' (Nguyen 2020).

In the aforementioned article for the *Večer* newspaper, I stressed that the three aforementioned reasons – behaviour of others, arrival of a new 'king' and schismogenesis – might not be enough for me to delete the former Twitter account. The last straw was the realisation that I was becoming someone who tweeted not only online, but live, as well. I had been gradually changing in line of the principle 'you are what you post'.

By saying this, I'm paraphrasing a famous saying 'you are what you eat', and by the way also touching on a lesser known one, 'you are what you drive'. As Saša Babič and I have found – in the wake of Tim Dant (2004) – from research on transportation habits, a car can be a key identity marker, 'merging' with the owner into a temporary formation, an assemblage which could be called 'driver-car' (Podjed, Babič 2015; Babič, Podjed 2016). We have established that people in vehicles change their identity and behave differently in traffic when they are walking on pavement, driving a bicycle or sitting behind a wheel. And it doesn't stop there: they are characterised by the type of their car. Therefore, it is not insignificant whether they are sitting in a large sedan, a SUV or a smaller vehicle with hardly enough space for four people. As we noted in our research, the car type influenced even the forms of expressing anger and other emotions inside the vehicle, as well as through the vehicle, e.g. flashing lights, honking and taking off with screeching tires.

I witnessed something similar to the findings of the abovementioned research on traffic habits and transformation of drivers during bouts of road rage in 2022, in the streets and other public places, in increasingly specific instances, though the people's identity didn't depend on the vehicle, but instead on the networks and media which transformed the society. A watershed moment for this realisation was a seemingly insignificant one, but it stayed with me for a long time. I articulated it in the aforementioned article for the *Večer* newspaper as follows:

The one drop too many foretelling the flood was a fleeting moment, which happened approximately a month ago, as I was waiting in front of a car park for a friend, a public figure because of his professional work, media appearances, as well as for his Twitter posts, which had been – in my opinion – legitimate and reconcilable, never offensive. I was standing next to a fence and waved hello from afar as he was getting out and taking his parking ticket. At that moment, his face fell as he heard a harsh remark of a stranger rushing by and snapped at him along the way. It was not about content it was about the way the words were spoken. Harshly, offensively, thoughtlessly. We went for a walk through the city and it took both of us a few minutes to regain composure. Once he calmed down I asked him if this happened a lot. 'Almost every day,' he confirmed, adding that people had obviously started tweeting live (Podjed 2022b).

While such incidences left me in shock over where society was heading, I was still more or less unscathed by the 'digital transformation', which started leaving traces in the physical world, as well. The one drop too many was, as written above, of an entirely personal nature:

I noticed some time ago that tweeting had made me start to transform in line with the principle 'you are what you post'. Just like people are characterised by the vehicle they drive, they are similarly characterised by the network they primarily use. If someone drives a German brand black sedan, they will behave differently than if they were driving a bicycle. And if someone predominantly uses Twitter, they will eventually start thinking in 'twitter' and forming short, powerful sentences in everyday life, as well. (Podjed 2022b)

I continued that my increasingly obsessive thinking about my next tweet and checking online reactions to my posts led to my having less and less time for myself and others. I caught myself ever more often in a similar situation than Nir Eyal. In his book *Indistractable* he writes about his pre-school daughter who, during play-time, wanted to answer a question, which was important to her. He asked her to wait a moment, as he just received a push notification and started to answer. Before he was done, his daughter left, and he missed an unrepeatable moment – spending uninterrupted time with someone who was supposed to be the centre of his attention (Eyal 2019).

When I, too, realised that more and more important things and people slipped out of my focus, I decided to delete my profile. First, I wrote the aforementioned text for the *Večer* newspaper, as a sort of an 'obituary' at the occasion of parting with my own digital double, and then, on Wednesday, 9 November 2022, I posted my last tweet, announcing that I would be terminating my Twitter profile on Sunday – and providing a link to the longer farewell text in the form of the aforementioned article. What followed was astonishing. My last post, which many had shared, as well, was generating numerous comments, likening me to a 'snowflake', who apparently got scared of posting and threw in the towel instead of continuing to participate in the endless 'game' of who was going to surprise, insult, hurt or taunt someone else with their posts and comments the most. It struck me as especially interesting that my leaving the social network was the most upsetting to those who had called on me the most to delete my account. It seems that my presence wasn't as disturbing for them as they tried to make it appear with their comments. Perhaps it was altogether the other way around: my online presence gave meaning to their digital existence, and by my bidding farewell their existence lost a little bit of their purpose.

The next surprise regarding my farewell from Twitter was how technically challenging the process was. Considering that creating a profile was relatively easy, the 'digital suicide', as deleting one's existence on the network could be called, was far more difficult. On the Twitter version of the time it was not enough to merely click on the 'deactivate account' option, which should erase all past activity, it was necessary to delete every digital trace 'by hand', that is delete older posts and reposts. Because doing all these 'by hand' would have been a very lengthy process, I turned to software tools to do that for me, but quickly realised that the free version had an upper limit of posts per day it could delete. This led me to buying the paid version, which enabled me to erase old posts.

When I – presumably, at least – erased all my tracks, as I didn't want anyone to register using my username in the future and be able to manage my posts, I was facing a new dilemma. After deactivating my account, Twitter let me know that there was a limited time period within which I could reactivate my profile. I expected the process of erasure to take a day, but it was thus extended to several weeks of insecurity, during which my digital double – akin to *Schrödinger's cat* – was alive and existing, while at

the same time it had already left the digital world and was dead; somewhat like being stuck in some sort of purgatory. To be or not to be – that was the question in this case, and like me, other users of the network were perplexed by it, as they were leaving Twitter at the time and later X in droves, searching for a new haven, a new community that would allow them to come together and socialise. To be alone, isolated, expelled from the community, albeit on one's own initiative, was becoming increasingly unbearable in the digital world, as well.

#### **4 Arrival to the new digital haven**

I was not alone in my search for a new digital shelter. In November 2022, right after Musk's official Twitter takeover, large numbers of people started to leave the network and searched for another place elsewhere. Mastodon was one of the possible havens, but it's organised differently than the former Twitter, now X. Instead of a centralised network, Mastodon is actually a federation of different separate networks, which are at the same time loosely connected, intertwined. A vast number of people joined this 'network of networks' in a short amount of time. As Eugen Rochko, the creator of Mastodon and the only full time employee at the time explained, the network hosted 2.5 million users per month on 8,600 servers. During the 'exodus', the number rose quickly; the network registered around four thousand downloads of application per day, and as many as 149 thousand per day for Android operating system, and 235 thousand for iOS system during a short peak. Rochko explained that the leap coincided with the time Twitter announced mass layoffs, eliminating entire departments in the company, including those responsible for public relations, and those working on post-moderation and safety (Lunden 2022).

On 9 September 2022 I set up a profile on Mastodon, or rather on a federal 'national' subnetwork called Toot.si, which appealed to me and was also used the most during the 'move'. I posted my first series of short texts on 18 December. They mostly covered my feelings at entering this new 'network space' (cf. Podjed 2010, where I wrote about the formation and development of social networks). The first three posts were Twitter-like in that they were short, but also somewhat sarcastic and (self)ironic, which had been the norm on the network I left behind. First I wrote, self-ironically referring to my baldness: 'Here, too, I have to answer the question, 'What's on your mind?' It's a good thing I don't get asked 'What's on your head?'" That's what I wrote in the comment window on Toot.si, in answer to the question to users of the network: 'What's on your mind?' This first post already garnered response from several 'deserters', greeting me in the comments and advising me to set my interface language to Slovenian. Soon after that, I wrote: 'Meeting on a new network is somewhat reminiscent of a high-school reunion: same discussions, older profile pictures.' As I recollect, I used these words to greet my colleagues who migrated to the new digital realm from Twitter, and



let them know we were still peers, albeit aged a bit. Again this time a user I used to correspond with on Twitter chimed in, commenting that I must have substituted one drug for another when I switched to Toot.si. I responded by saying that I was actually on other drugs, as well, including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, making Toot.si a 'recreational drug', at best.

My third text, which I posted that same day, already caused the first conflict, but not between me and 'the people', also known as everymen who used to bicker on Twitter about everything. I received a mild warning from the network admin, the 'first among equals'. He warned me that I should have lowered my expectations regarding the network I had just moved to. This was in response to something I wrote in a post because the interface seemed clumsy to me: 'I mean, I'm not going to complain about the interface exactly, but I would still like to know, where we are going from here. To IRC? For a beer?' The first responses came from 'everymen', not because my remark annoyed them; they had different drinks in mind for us to hang out over. But the admin wrote, albeit calmly, and also being a tiny bit patronising, that Mastodon is an open source network, and to check the issue tracker for possible previous mentions of 'this inconvenience that has been bothering you'. If nothing along these lines has been written there yet, I should start a new issue, i.e. a new topic or problem and present my opinion in detail. 'This is the most constructive manner of complaining,' the admin ended. I was somewhat offended by this message, as I was not used to such comments from admins at the network I had left. On the contrary: there was actually a complete absence of comments or warnings from the admin's position. Despite this introductory misunderstanding, those first days on the new network seemed romantic, something that I wrote and posted the following day, that is on 19 November 2022. I mentioned that I liked the 'romantic side of revamped relationships,' adding that, 'Words of encouragement, mutual assistance, kindness in every step of the way ... Not unlike a married couple, occasionally on bad terms and profoundly tired of each other, going away for the weekend with no real expectations, and then extending it because things start 'rolling'.' Newcomers, tired of constant bickering, actually seemed extremely congruous, with a positive attitude – unlike Twitter, where conflicts were quick to emerge. One last thing I would like to add is that I find this 'long weekend' is also a lesson to all 'migrants', allowing us to once again realise the importance of relationships with those we hold close to heart. I ended my post with 'May the romance last,' adding three heart emojis.

But the 'romance' didn't last long, not so much because of my posts, but because of other's posts, which admins found controversial or inappropriate and supposedly included too many triggers for people with psychological and physical trauma. Troublesome posts included, for instance, pictures of naked bodies and even cold cuts on a plate, which supposedly triggered people with eating disorders. The network explained how these triggers supposedly affected people:

Be mindful of the people you communicate with, as their experience might differ drastically from yours, including severe psychological and physical trauma. People who lived through a traumatic experience and developed triggers can experience a panic attack when faced with a trigger, especially if it's unexpected. Content warnings don't present a major inconvenience to you as a user, and at the same time ensure a much better well-being for individuals who would like to read your posts, but find it difficult to confront these topics for a variety of reasons (Toot.si 2023).

A list of triggers published alongside this guideline was exhaustive. They included, for instance, food, eye contact, mental health, indecency (including nudity, erotica and pornography), self-harm, violence, rape, ableism (i.e. discrimination towards people with special needs and prejudice against them), ageism (i.e. discrimination and stereotyping based on age), specism (i.e. discrimination based on species membership), racism, supremacy, xenophobia, sexism, fat-shaming, transphobia, homophobia, antisemitism, holocaust, Nazism and neo-Nazism, guns, war, politics, current and controversial news, illicit drugs, alcohol, sarcasm, flashy images, inaccessible content with many emojis or uncommon font and even all caps, which indicate yelling in online texts, on forums and networks (Toot.si 2023).

In short, almost everything that was most desirable and most shared on Twitter, was banned or controversial on the new network. Stricter rules should even prompt new users of Mastodon, or its sub-network Toot.si, to describe posted photos and other images in order to facilitate access for the blind and visually impaired.

## 5 Intercultural clashes

New rules led to many 'intercultural' clashes and communicational slips, reminiscent of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a 1977 film directed by Steven Spielberg and featuring Earthlings' attempts at communication with visitors from space. An even better metaphor than this film would be colonisation of newly discovered continents, when supposedly 'well-mannered' and 'sustainable' natives were stormed by a horde of gruesome colonisers, unfamiliar with the language and oblivious of local customs – and also unprepared to learn, accept or integrate them (for stereotyping natives, see Graeber and Wengrow 2022). This led to a growing number of disputes, at least at the beginning, as exodus from Twitter continued, it took a few weeks for some sort of temporary armistice and coexistence to be established among the 'natives', some of whom had been on the network for years, and the 'newcomers', rushing into the unknown in the hope of a better world and new possibilities suggesting themselves on the horizon.

I kept following developments on this network up to 4 January 2023, all the while finding that my posts were often missed, unnoticed. What I once wrote on Twitter, garnering a huge response, from likes to shares, was overlooked on Toot.si. The line

between too much and too little attention is obviously a thin one, even when it comes to networks, while expectations about 'local norms' and customs are great.

I observed similar intercultural clashes on the network Threads, which was presented to the public on 5 July 2023 by Meta, a company led by Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder of Facebook and (co)owner of numerous other digital communication solutions and networks, including WhatsApp and Instagram. When introducing this network, Meta took advantage of the very same exodus from Twitter, or X network, and created a platform which almost perfectly matched Twitter in terms of appearance: short texts, allowing users to like, comment and share. The timing of the launch could hardly be more appropriate, which reflected in an exceptionally rapid growth of the number of users; in just five days Threads was used by 100 million users, which surpassed the previous record held by ChatGPT, which is based on artificial intelligence. Access in the European Union was initially disabled due to legal challenges, but on 14 December 2023, EU citizens, including citizens of Slovenia, were given the option to post on this network. While user experience was better than the one on Mastodon's Toot.si, the experience of 'intercultural clash' was similar, even if for a somewhat different reason. The Meta Company namely made it possible for Instagram users to open accounts on Threads and automatically follow all Instagram accounts they followed beforehand. This led to an unusual twist, in which Instagram influencers, who spent years solidifying their positions on the network, mainly by posting images and short videos, capitalised on their pre-existing Instagram profiles to also accumulate the most social capital, i.e. connections, on Threads network, while newcomers joining the network over their disillusionment with Twitter had to start weaving their personal networks and 'threads' (as a series of messages and comments is called, which gave a name to this new solution for making connections and exchanging opinions) from scratch.

I summed up my impressions on the first few days on this 'substitute' network on 3 January 2024 with the following text:

Overnight, the most influential users of Threads have become the ones who accumulated the most social capital on Instagram and have now transformed it into a different environment, which is primarily based on words, not images. This leads to an intercultural clash among those who are used to put on a show of strength, only using words. And the latter, who have predominantly never worked on their visual identity, have been reduced in size and can barely get a word in edgeways.

Reactions from other users of the network for the most part corroborated my findings, while one of the Instagram influencers posted a comment saying that 'it's still too early to draw conclusions', also adding that: 'Now is the right moment for everyone who wish to build a new base of people.'

## 6 Conclusion

I find the first mention of this ‘new base’ extremely significant for the subject at hand, that is changing identities during constant changes in the era of online social networks, or in the ‘network society’ (Podjed 2010)<sup>2</sup>. This is because networks are constantly changing and transforming, and their structure is susceptible to both social and economic changes, as well as to technological breakthroughs. Musk’s acquisition of Twitter is perhaps the most indicative of these networks’ fragility, which became apparent when he transformed a community of approximately 400 million people, more or less actively participating on the network, almost overnight. A single business move, that is the acquisition of Twitter, rocked the community with – if the network were a country – more citizens than the United States of America. The transformation of the network to X coincided with the exodus, which I presented in this paper and which led to its users’ search for new havens on Mastodon, Threads and other networks, where they attempted to establish their ‘own base’, which would allow them to feel comfortable enough to continue their digital existence.

Such events seem to have made online networks turn into ‘permanent temporary dwellings’, onto which we transfer a good amount of our identities, with the awareness that the comfortable bubble could burst at any moment – and also realisation (or at least subconscious understanding) that we will never be the owners of our dwellings and consequently our identities, that the owner will always be someone else. It depends on the good or bad mood of this individual – or a group of people –, whether our lives are leisurely and exciting or stressful and bitter. But there is really no alternative to sticking to the networks which the digital transformation has made ‘hyperreal’ (Baudrillard 1999), that is, more real than reality itself. For there is not only truth in the saying ‘You are what you post’, which I have mentioned earlier, there is another maxim coming to the foreground: ‘I post, therefore I am.’

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<sup>2</sup> This awakens past discussions on identification processes and identities (e.g. Muršič 1997), which are presented as fluid, temporary and negotiated regularly. This is perhaps applies even more to digital environments than to physical space.

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