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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## A fake tweet sparked panic at Eli Lilly and may have cost Twitter millions

The pharmaceutical giant halted ad spending after fake blue-check accounts went viral. For \$8, Twitter is 'losing out on millions of dollars in ad revenue,' a former Eli Lilly official said.



By [Drew Harwell](#)

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The nine-word tweet was sent Thursday afternoon from an account using the name and logo of the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and Co., and it immediately attracted a giant response: “We are excited to announce insulin is free now.”

The tweet carried a blue “verified” check mark, a badge that Twitter had used for years to signal an account’s authenticity — and that Twitter’s new billionaire owner, Elon Musk, had, while [declaring](#) “power to the people!” suddenly opened to anyone, regardless of their identity, as long as they paid \$8.

But the tweet was a fake — one of what became a [fast-multiplying horde](#) of impersonated businesses, political leaders, government agencies and celebrities. By the time Twitter had removed the tweet, more than six hours later, the account had inspired [other fake Eli Lilly copycats](#) and been viewed millions of times.

Inside the real Eli Lilly, the fake sparked a panic, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they weren’t authorized to speak publicly. Company officials scrambled to contact Twitter representatives and demanded they kill the viral spoof, worried it could undermine their brand’s reputation or push false claims about people’s medicine. Twitter, its [staffing cut in half](#), didn’t react for hours.



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The aftermath of that \$8 spoof offers a potentially costly lesson for Musk, who has long treated Twitter as a playground for bawdy jokes and trolls but now must find a way to operate as a business following his \$44 billion takeover.

By Friday morning, Eli Lilly executives had ordered a halt to all Twitter ad campaigns — a potentially serious blow, given that the \$330 billion company controls the kind of massive advertising budget that Musk says the company needs to avoid bankruptcy. They also paused their Twitter publishing plan for all corporate accounts around the world.

“For \$8, they’re potentially losing out on millions of dollars in ad revenue,” said Amy O’Connor, a former senior communications official at Eli Lilly who now works at a trade association. “What’s the benefit to a company ... of staying on Twitter? It’s not worth the risk when patient trust and health are on the line.”

Eli Lilly, which declined to respond to questions about the episode or how much money it has spent on advertising with Twitter, is one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical manufacturers, known for the anti-depression drug Prozac and the diabetes treatments Trulicity and Humalog.

It maintains a robust Twitter presence. In addition to its main corporate account, [@LillyPad](#), it runs stand-alone accounts devoted to [diabetes care](#), [European health policy](#), [clinical trials](#), [rheumatology](#) and the distribution of health information in [Spanish](#), [Italian](#) and [French](#). It spends more than \$100 million a year on TV commercials and digital-ad campaigns in the United States, according to MediaRadar, a marketing data firm.

When Twitter failed to react quickly to its entreaties about the fake account, Eli Lilly took to its official account in the late afternoon Thursday to apologize to its 130,000 followers for the “[misleading](#)” fake. When the fake account still was active five hours later, a Twitter ad-sales rep in New York [publicly pleaded](#) with Musk for the fake account to be removed.

Musk did not respond, but the account was suspended late Thursday night. The next morning, Musk [tweeted](#) that the launch of Twitter’s new \$8 verification regime was “overall proceeding well.”

Musk did not respond to requests for comment for this article. Twitter’s communications team also did not respond; many of its employees were fired in the massive layoff that Musk imposed on Nov. 4.

In a short statement Friday, Eli Lilly said it was “working to correct this situation.”

Musk has said the sweeping change to Twitter’s “verified” system, first unveiled in 2009, would shake up the establishment journalists he routinely criticizes by breaking their “[oligopoly on information](#).”

Twitter is not checking the identity of anyone who pays \$8 for the check mark, which looks identical to the current “verified” badge. Musk has said spammers and impersonators would be dissuaded by the fact that their \$8 would not be paid back if their accounts were suspended.

The sudden shift, however, has decimated some of the last lingering bits of trust among advertisers in the platform, said Jenna Golden, who ran Twitter’s political and advocacy ad-sales team until 2017 and now runs Golden Strategies, a D.C. consulting firm.

Twitter, she said, has never been a “must buy” for advertisers. Though a popular way to reach influential political figures and news junkies, it has never had the scale and performance of digital juggernauts like Google and Facebook.

Now, with its verification system in shreds, “it’s making it really easy for advertisers to say: ‘You know what, I don’t need to be here anymore,’ and walk away,” Golden said. “People are not just providing inaccurate information but damaging information, with the ability to look legitimate. That is just not a stable place for a brand to invest.”

Compounding the issue, Golden said, is Musk himself, who has pushed tumultuous changes to the company that have stunned paying customers, confused industry observers and led Twitter’s power users to head for the exits.

“People see the leader of this company who is erratic and unpredictable, who is making very knee-jerk decisions and rolling them back quite quickly,” she said. “He claims he wants to create a successful business, then does everything he can to turn off the advertisers that are its main revenue stream. ... I just don’t see a world in which advertisers are going to be excited to come back and willing to commit dollars to his experiment.”

As fake accounts multiplied on the site Thursday, Musk responded to a sexually explicit tweet from a fake President Biden with two cry-laughing emoji and tweeted that Twitter users had shared “some epically funny tweets.”

By Friday morning, however, Twitter had paused its blue-check program, known as Twitter Blue, due to “impersonation issues” and began attaching “official” labels to Eli Lilly and other major corporate accounts.

On Friday evening, Musk tweeted Twitter would begin adding a “parody” tag to fake blue-check accounts. He also defended Eli Lilly, tweeting at Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) — who had used the fake to call attention to high prices for insulin, a lifesaving drug — that the “price question is complex.”

Few of the nation’s most prominent businesses and political figures have escaped viral Twitter impersonations in recent days: Former presidents (Donald Trump, George W. Bush) and giant companies (the defense contractor Lockheed Martin, Musk’s automaker Tesla) have all been retweeted widely, with fake-but-verified badges attached.

That shift has led some major advertisers to also pull back. Omnicom Media Group, an ad firm that represents corporate giants such as Apple and McDonald’s, recommended clients pause all Twitter activity, saying in a memo first reported by The Verge that the “risk to our clients’ brand safety has risen sharply to a level most would find unacceptable.”

For Eli Lilly, the \$8 fake account represented a disastrous and high-profile surprise. The Indianapolis-based conglomerate employs more than 37,000 people across 18 countries and brings in \$28 billion a year in revenue.

Sanders and many others used the parody to shine a spotlight on insulin costs, a common point of company criticism. When Eli Lilly’s share price sank 4 percent on Friday — in line with a drop in other health care stocks — many Twitter users credited the fake account: The “tweet just cost Eli Lilly billions,” said one tweet with more than 380,000 likes. “The most consequential \$8 in modern human history,” said another.


Some Twitter users celebrated the accounts as modern satires or expressed excitement at the idea that Musk's move could backfire, exposing Twitter to legal threats. Other fake-but-verified Eli Lilly spoofs have proliferated, gaining their own broad audiences before they, too, were suspended: One tweeted, "Humalog is now \$400. We can do this whenever we want and there's nothing you can do about it."

To health care companies such as Eli Lilly, the change offered not just a reputational threat but the risk that other fakes could threaten people's well-being. Eli Lilly's Twitter accounts routinely field medical questions and work to correct misinformation about side effects, health issues and long-term care.

Twitter's change, O'Connor said, has shaken not just Eli Lilly but many other companies now worried about the risk of participating in a platform where an account's legitimacy is no longer guaranteed.

"This isn't just about Twitter, this is about patients' health," O'Connor said. What if a public health group was "spoofed and shared information that made people's diabetes worse? Where does it stop? It feels like this is literally just the beginning, and it's only going to get worse."



Eli Lilly and Company 

@EliLillyandCo

We are excited to announce insulin is free now.

1:36 PM · Nov 10, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

1,575 Retweets   707 Quote Tweets   10.9K Likes