

SEEKING FOLLOWS

TWITTER¹

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Lisa awoke and checked the smart sleeve of her shirt. 1155
Displayed on the fabric in e-ink was her total number
of lifetime followers on Twitter and the number of fol-
lows she had to spend. 93 available follows. Lisa was
aiming for 100.

Since Twitter had taken over the governance 1156
of London, following the great democratic dissolution
of 2038, things had changed significantly. Although
Twitter had begun as a social media company in the
mid-2000s, it had rapidly expanded. First streaming
video and live events through the Twitter platform in
the late 2010s, by the mid-2020s it had partnered with
a series of challenger banks to create a new form of
digital currency: the follow.

The follow as a unit of exchange was trans- 1157
formative. No longer created through the production
of goods or services, the follow was a unit created
through the direct capture of human attention itself.
In early versions of Twitter, people could follow one
another and broadcast messages to their followers.
In turn, Twitter used its knowledge of user behaviour
to target advertising through promoted tweets within
a user's timeline.

Alongside promoted advertising, compa- 1158
nies quickly became aware that users with the most

1 The following speculative fiction and satire imagines living in a city where a social media business model becomes a credit/payment system. Such a thought experiment could equally apply if the city were run by Facebook or Instagram. Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for the purpose of conducting a thought experiment without intent to infringe.

followers had significant influence and paid such 'influencers' to implicitly and explicitly advertise and market their products and services directly. As such, two economies operated on Twitter at any one time. The formal attention economy involved Twitter selling targeted advertising to its customers (the companies and businesses that wanted to advertise on it). The informal economy involved users selling the attention they had garnered to companies directly, evidencing their influence through the number of followers they had.

For Twitter, the success of the platform and its 1159
ability to create profit was based on the overall number
of users on the platform as a whole. But for individ-
ual users what mattered was their specific number
of followers, which they could use as a currency to
convince advertisers to pay them.

The follow currency, introduced in 2024, had 1160
begun as an attempt to expand the formal economy of
Twitter as a space for selling advertising and attention.
No longer confined to the screens of PCs and smart
phones, Twitter took advantage of the wide-scale
adoption of Alternative Reality (AR) lenses, projections
and fabrics that now overlaid almost every surface of
the built environment and formed the material of most
clothing. As well as 'earning' followers by posting in-
teresting content to the Twitter platform, users could
also earn follows by viewing and displaying advertising
that was emitted from these surfaces, which were cus-
tomised to users' individual Twitter profiles (mandatory
since 2039).

As a currency, follows had both a public and 1161
private aspect. On the one hand, follows referred to the
publicly visible total number of follows and followers
gained over the lifetime of a user's account. On the
other hand, follows referred to a privately visible avail-
able number of follows, which were the total number of

follows that could be exchanged for services. A user may have 1000 lifetime follows, for example, but have spent 600 follows, meaning that they had only 400 follows available to use.

1162 Twitter argued that the follow currency was a great means to generate additional income, especially for the low paid and those on zero-hour contracts, who now made up around 67% of the working age population. Whereas the national currency, the Great British Pound, could be earned and spent on anything, the follow could be used only on a range of Twitter-owned or approved services, such as utility bills, city taxation and, in some cases, city housing.

1163 For the rich or Twitter famous, follows meant little as a currency of exchange. Utilities, rent and tax could be paid using pounds. At the same time, verified users and popular influencers could join the follow exchange programme and cash out their follows for pounds, allowing them to leverage the follows they were paid as part of advertising deals to enhance their monetary wealth. But, for people like Lisa, who were neither verified, famous, or part of the follow exchange programme, follows remained a necessary means of accessing services. For Lisa, follows were the difference between heating the flat and going cold. Follows were the difference between paying her city tax or having bailiffs knocking on the door.

1164 The 100 follows that Lisa needed would pay her overdue electricity bill. Although she worked at a logistics packing warehouse, her hours were unreliable, and she never knew if there was a shift available until two hours before it was due to start. With no email confirming her on the morning shift, Lisa had little other choice than to tap on the smart sleeve of her shirt and browse the range of self-advertising options. As well as paying users to view adverts, Twitter would also pay users to broadcast adverts from their own smart

clothing. The number of follows earned depended on the profile of the user, the type of advert emitted, where the user was located, and the length of time the advert was emitted...

1165 Twitter celebrities with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers were in high demand for self-advertising. These users had the option from Twitter to advertise aspirational and designer brands such as Louis Vuitton, Rolex and Chanel and could earn thousands of follows per minute for doing so at the right place and time. In the same way that verified users could exchange their follows for pounds, more popular users could also utilise hashtags to influence trends and conversations on their followers feeds, generating more followers and thus more money.

1166 As a user with only 93 available follows, Lisa's options were rather more limited. If she stayed in a public space in her own neighbourhood, Brixton, she could advertise dog food for 1 follow per hour or an escort service for 5 follows per hour. 'Gross', she thought. If she travelled on the underground to Covent Garden she could probably advertise ice cream or English tea to tourists for 2.5 follows per hour. However, she wouldn't know what products were available to advertise, or their rate of pay, until she actually arrived in Kensington, as Twitter's advertising service would only offer self-advertising options depending on her location at the time. The underground cost 2 follows to use, so travelling to Kensington was risky.

1167 Lisa also had to take into account the anti-loitering laws that Covent Garden had introduced when self-advertising on smart clothing had become popular through Twitter. In the first few months residents had complained that people from poorer areas would travel to Covent Garden and stand in the same spot all day in order to earn the maximum number of follows. As such, in Covent Garden, the advert would only emit from her

clothing if the GPS in her shirt registered movement, with stops of no more than three minutes allowed at any one point. In Brixton, however, she could loiter all she wanted without the advert, and thus her earnings, being interrupted.

1168 She would take a risk. Leaving the flat she walked to the underground and took the train to Covent Garden. Leaving the station she checked the options on her smart shirt again. Scottish shortbread for 2 follows an hour. It would do, she thought. Activating the advert, her shirt turned a bright red tartan. The short bread brand logo began to rotate across the surface of the shirt and a short bag pipe tune began to play from the speakers sewn into the shirt's lining. Rolling her eyes in dull acceptance, she began to walk the streets around the market.

1169 Many ignored the advert as she walked. Using face and eye tracking technology in the cameras on the shirt, the advertising API recognised the lack of interest and increased the volume of the bag pipe tune. The regulated volume limit for self-advertising in Covent Garden was 84 decibels, but even so, the tune gave Lisa a headache. Lisa knew that if the advert did not register enough attention, then her rate of pay in follows would drop, until she was earning nothing and the advert disappeared from the surface of the shirt. Within an hour, the advertised rate of 2 follows an hour had dropped to 1. Seven hours later Lisa had earned enough to pay her overdue bill and a fare home to Brixton.

1170 Paying her electricity bill as she walked back to the underground station, Lisa looked around her. In London, not having advertising on your smart clothes was itself a sign of distinction and wealth. Twitter had promised that the follow currency would usher in a new era of reduced costs and democratic access to services in London. For Lisa, and many others like her, it had done the opposite.

1171 Earning the human attention that the follow currency was based on required being out in public, but doing so physically marked out those who could only earn follows through self-advertising. Trapped in a cycle of spending and earning follows, such users had little to no chance of accessing better self-advertising deals or the kind of direct advertising offered to popular influencers on Twitter.

1172 While Twitter had transformed the aesthetics of the city and how it was used, it seemed that this transformation had reinforced existing inequalities between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots. Arriving back at her flat at 10pm, Lisa went to bed with the ringing of sampled bagpipes in her ears. As her eyes closed she wondered if she would be called up to take a shift at the warehouse in the morning or would have to resort to more self-advertising. Neither option offered much appeal.

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