

David Shiffman on Why Bluesky Matters

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You are listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior publicist for the journals division of Hopkins Press.

Today we're talking with David Shiffman, who is the author of *Why Sharks Matter*. David Shiffman is a marine conservation biologist and public science engagement specialist based in Washington D.C. In addition to *Why Sharks Matter*, he's a prolific writer with words appearing in *National Geographic*, *Washington Post*, *Scientific American*, *Scuba Magazine*, his blog *Southern Fried Science*, the list goes on.

Now, if you're on the socials, as so many of us are, you've likely been aware of the dramatic shift in the landscape for the legacy platforms like Facebook and Twitter, also known now as X. Like many, David Shiffman made the leap from Twitter to new platforms like Bluesky, a Twitter-like platform. Bit by bit, Dr. Shiffman began to notice the way Science Twitter was abandoning their former platform and picking up their conversations again over on Bluesky. Ever the scientist, Dr. Shiffman connected with his colleague Julia Wester to collect and study the data, resulting in a new paper for, *The Journal of Integrative and Comparative Biology* entitled, "Scientists no Longer Find Twitter Professionally Useful and have Switched to Bluesky." It's an incredibly timely and useful study for anyone interested in what's going on in social media, academic inquiry, and publishing. And we were excited to talk with David Shiffman for a little bit about why Bluesky matters.

Well, thank you, David, for joining me on the podcast today. You're the author of the book *Why Sharks Matter*.

David Shiffman

Yes.

Rahne Alexander

Which we published, and so, of course, I recognized your name immediately upon reading your new study on how scientists are using social media. But before we get into that, how's the reception for your book been? Do you have any interesting stories to share since we published it?

David Shiffman

So I actually organized a international book tour for *Why Sharks Matter*, all using social media showing the power of this tool for professional use for scientists, and so far I've spoken in 83 cities on three continents.

Rahne Alexander

Amazing.

David Shiffman

I also gave a talk in Antarctica about the book. So I've now given an invited professional lecture about marine biology on all seven continents.

Rahne Alexander

Amazing. Is that like an EGOT for scientists?

David Shiffman

I recently learned that you can win a Grammy for an audio book, and you can win an Emmy for a documentary. So I just need to figure out how to get a Tony and then I'm there.

Rahne Alexander

Excellent. Excellent. Well, that's exciting and it dovetails very nicely into what we're here to talk about.

David Shiffman

Uh-huh.

Rahne Alexander

So, you recently published a study in a journal that I will say is not a Hopkins Press title, Journal of Integrative and Comparative Biology, but your article, which is called "Scientists No Longer Find Twitter Professionally Useful and have Switched to Bluesky" struck a chord with me. I'm the publicist and social media professional working on the journal side for Hopkins.

David Shiffman

Uh-huh.

Rahne Alexander

And I've been witness to the shifting landscape of social media and your study has already garnered quite a bit of attention in the university presses and the research community. Can you talk a little bit about how this study was initiated?

David Shiffman

Sure. So I'll give you a little bit of background here and say I've been an early adopter of using social media for public science engagement. I've been on Twitter since 2009. I no longer am. But I was one of the first 20,000 people on Facebook, which now has billions of users. I was one of the first 50,000 people on Bluesky back when it was invite-only. So there in my world of conservation science, we've long recognized that publishing papers in journals is going to be a vital part of the process of establishing evidence. But if our goal is changing laws and changing people's behaviors, you can't just do that. You have to break out of the ivory tower and talk to people. And people have long been looking for tools for this. So I stand on the proverbial shoulders of giants in my field when talking about communicating science to the public, but I was one of the first people doing it online using these social media tools. And for a decade, I trained people all over the world how to use social media for public science engagement. Over 2,000 people have taken some of my workshops which are increasingly now over Zoom, but they used to be at conferences, or I would be brought into a university and spend a few days there. And I got over 2,000 early

career scientists to sign up for Twitter and practice using it over the last 10 years. And Twitter was unbelievably powerful for this. It resulted in people finding jobs and people finding research partners. One of my most cited papers is written with people who I've never met in real life and only knew from Twitter. I've gotten invitations to — as a graduate student. I got all expense paid trips to more than 30 conferences around the world because of Twitter and they didn't care that I was also presenting my research. They just wanted someone there coordinating the conference Twitter feed.

Rahne Alexander

Amazing.

David Shiffman

I have long been a power user and evangelist and big believer in this. And then everything changed when Elon Musk took over Twitter and he made it useless for professional purposes. It is now a cesspool of right-wing extremism and of pseudoscience, of organized harassment campaigns against scientists, especially of minorities. And people have been saying, “Oh this isn't this isn't working anymore. This isn't enjoyable anymore. This isn't accomplishing my goals anymore. Oh well, I guess social media is dead.” And there were lots of alternatives to Twitter that were proposed. And of those, the one I was hoping people would choose was Bluesky. And it turns out it seemed like a lot of people were choosing Bluesky. There are a lot of technical reasons for why I think it's better, but the short answer is there's no central algorithm that a new evil billionaire can buy and change. So your work isn't shared anymore. What you see on Bluesky is entirely determined by who you follow and don't follow. And the harassment tools are better. So if someone's being a jerk, you can just block them into oblivion, instead of partial blocking so that they can still bother you.

So I've been trying to get people on Bluesky forever. Again, I was there when it was invite-only and I was begging them for more invite codes to get more scientists on there and it seemed like lots of people were joining and finding the benefits and this was confirmed in reporting in *Science* and *Nature* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. But all of their studies were sort of anecdotal. They were just talking to individual people and saying, “You know, Twitter, Twitter's not fun anymore. I want it, but I still see the power of social media.” I tried out some things and Bluesky worked best for me. And I said “It sure seems like this is happening a lot. I wonder if this is a real phenomenon or if it's just anecdotal. Let's do a survey.” So I contacted my good friend and colleague Dr. Julia Wester, who is also one of the people who I got on to Bluesky with an early invite code and she said “Yeah this is an interesting question” and we designed and distributed this survey.

Rahne Alexander

That's amazing. And yeah, like not a moment too soon because, as a data professional was really seeing that this transition was happening and being able to talk about it anecdotally like you said but not really having the data to back it up. Bluesky itself was having a hard time catching up. Right?

David Shiffman

So Bluesky is, for how new it is, it actually has an enormous user base. It took Twitter longer than this to get to this number of people. But there are every few days there's some new op-ed by someone who tried Bluesky for 15 minutes that says, "Oh, the conversation's dead there." No, it's not. You just have to try a little harder to find the conversations, which I think is good. It means there's no central algorithm and you choose what you what you see, what you hear, what conversations you're a part of. But it does mean that you can't just sign up and immediately see conversations.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. I mean I've been on the internet for a long time since the '90s and it I remember it having a lot of that veneer of the early internet experience where you really often do you make it in your own image in a lot of ways, rather than have it being prefabricated for you.

David Shiffman

Yeah. For years I was telling people in my social media training workshops, a common complaint that I hear about Facebook is that it's boring. All I ever see is people talking about what they had for lunch and what movies they're watching. Facebook before the recent algorithm tweaks used to be almost entirely determined by what your friends post. So when you say, "I think Facebook is boring", you're saying I think my friends are boring.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

David Shiffman

My friends are not boring. Every time I log on, there's some thoughtful commentary on current events. There's some amazing travel adventure. There's someone some artist has made something wonderful. Um, and that's, you know, I've been very fortunate to have many fascinating and wonderful People in my life, and that's reflected in my social media feeds.

Rahne Alexander

Yes. And another thing that didn't escape my attention upon adopting Bluesky and moving the Press to a Bluesky Account, as well is that the outbound links linking to an external source were suddenly functioning again. And it really highlighted how hard that had become on Facebook, on Twitter, on these other platforms that had really downgraded the ability to link away from the site you're on.

David Shiffman

Yes. So, lots of people whether lots of lots of scientists and academics who use social media uh don't really think deeply about sort of the mechanics of what they're doing and how it works. They just think, "Oh, this is something that people do. I'll share my paper. I'll share a link to my lab. I'll share a link to news coverage about this locally important issue in my community and Twitter changed it so outbound links. So if you they want people just staying there and arguing there and I do mean arguing not just having a conversation that Twitter has a real bias towards conflict. Now, but that's not helpful if you're a journalist trying to get people to read your work. If you're an academic trying to get people to read your paper. If you're a environmental advocate trying to get people to learn about an issue and get involved, that requires

external links and Twitter to a huge extent and Facebook to a, a growing extent don't let you do that anymore. And that's bad. Bluesky doesn't care. Bluesky wants to be the platform that people use to have discussions about all kinds of stuff. And if it gets you to click somewhere else and go somewhere else, great. You found it through us. We're happy.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. Absolutely. So you went in and did this study. Uh, do you want to talk about the results? Every scientist loves the results. Right?

David Shiffman

Yes. Oh my goodness. So this was I I will tell you that I've done a lot of studies, of stakeholders, of scientists, of all kinds of groups. This is I believe the paper that has had the most profanity.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

David Shiffman

In the survey results. Uh, people have real strong opinions about Elon Musk. But we got over 800 scientists, science educators, and science communicators to fill out this voluntary survey, which is a shockingly a high number. We had said from the beginning if we got less than a hundred, it probably wouldn't be publishable. And then we got 800 in a few weeks.

Rahne Alexander

Wow.

David Shiffman

So people clearly had thought about this and were excited about it and wanted to talk about it. So we said to be eligible for this study you must work broadly in science, scientific research, scientific education or scientific communication. You have to have used Twitter at one point and you have to use Bluesky now either instead of or in addition to Twitter. So pretty broad acceptance criteria and over 800 people signed up. So some of the key topline messages here are that people used to use Twitter for all kinds of professional purposes for public science engagement for professional networking with other scientists for uh learning about their own field by following other scientists in their field. And overwhelmingly our respondents say "Twitter is much much worse than it used to be at all of those things." By "used to be" we mean before Elon Musk came in and changed how the site works.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

David Shiffman

There's a real discrete drop-off point after he did that. And overwhelmingly people said for every one of those purposes, you can do it much much more effectively on Bluesky than you can on Twitter." Now, nobody's saying that Bluesky is as good as Twitter was at its peak because it's not. As a huge Bluesky fan, I'll tell you it's not as good as golden age Science Twitter, but it's a lot better than Twitter is now. And

that's the real choice that matters. If I could go back to how Twitter was in 2014, 2015, I would do that in a second. But you can't. That's gone. So the choice is what is Twitter now and do we want that? And the answer for I think most academics should be a resounding no, we don't want that.

Some of the results that came in here pointed out that Elon Musk was one of the primary forces destroying American science and American higher education, ravaging The National Science Foundation and NOAA and the EPA and the National Park Service. That's him and his conspiracy theory out old version of what government should be. And several of our several of our respondents said, "It doesn't matter what I think of Twitter. I don't want to support Elon Musk and neither should you." If people aren't driven by these sort of moral philosophical arguments of why not to use it, the data is clear that it just doesn't work anymore.

So we didn't publish this in the paper, but I mentioned it in the press release that I wrote for the paper. I'm also a science blogger on *Southern Fried Science*, which remains one of the most widely read science blogs, and we track where people find our site from. And for almost a decade, every single day, Twitter was the number one or number two driver of traffic to the site. And since Musk took over, it hasn't been in the top 10.

Rahne Alexander

Mmm.

David Shiffman

So far in 2025, Bluesky has driven way more than 100 times as much traffic than Twitter has.

Rahne Alexander

Wow.

David Shiffman

So, if your goal again is to get people to they hear about something you're doing on social media, but then they click and go to your website to learn more, Twitter doesn't work for that anymore because they they hide outgoing links.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, it's tragic. I feel personally a sense of grief about it.

David Shiffman

Yes.

Rahne Alexander

I feel like I've gone through my Kubler-Ross stages of what Twitter was.

David Shiffman

Absolutely. People who aren't as capital V, capital O, very online as me, some of them were a little confused by how intensely emotionally I felt this loss. But it wasn't just the loss. People said it does it just feel like you lost a friend? No, it's more than that. I felt like it's the loss of a place where I met a lot of my friends and cut off future

opportunity to meet them. So, *American Scientist* magazine, the Sigma Xi publication, actually had me write a eulogy for Science Twitter.

Rahne Alexander

Wow.

David Shiffman

And that was their most read article in 2023. Um, and it was talking about how every everything that, I was, I was just reminding everyone of all the great stuff that happened there and how it's gone now. And it's hard to explain to people who never experienced it, but this was a just a wonderful place and it's gone. And of the Twitter that remains now, and I absolutely refuse to call it X, because that's ridiculous. Twitter, as it is now is not even a shadow of that. It's gone, that's gone. But Bluesky has some of what I liked about golden age Science Twitter. And every once in a while, a conversation will happen where someone will say, "You know, this reminds me of golden age Science Twitter." And I agree.

A couple interesting examples of this, just related to this new paper that we published, when I published it, I said "Hey, to prove the point that there are lots of scientists here, scientists, why don't you introduce yourselves?" and well over a hundred academics in a wide variety of fields in a day immediately said hey, here's who I am, follow me if you want to learn about archaeology or evolution of viruses or bird behavior or whatever And it was awesome. There are there are so many people talking about so many cool things on there. And you don't have to be an expert in that field to be able to follow it. But if you are an expert in that field, you'll learn more by following other people in your field. T

he analogy that I always used to use when convincing people to use uh social media was, you know, how you love conferences. Right? Like you might be the only person in your department who is a nerd about a very specific thing, but you go to a conference in that field and suddenly you're surrounded by all the other people who have dedicated their life to this one question and you feel accepted. You feel excited to talk about it. You're just geeking out to your heart's delight. If you use social media. Right? You can do that every day and Bluesky is starting to feel like that.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, that's great. So, were there results in your study that surprised you or were they pretty much down the line what you expected to see?

David Shiffman

The degree to which people were sort of confirming my own experiences was shocking. You get survey results and there's always some goofy outliers. You see this in in political polling a lot, and everyone always says, "I want to meet the two percent of people who agree with both of these counterintuitive statements." So surveys often have that. There was very little of that here. In 800 responses, I think there were only four that just didn't make any sense. And that was not 400, *four*. And those were people who I think were just remembering wrong. One of the questions that we asked people was, "When did you join Twitter?" And four people said that they joined Twitter before Twitter existed.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

David Shiffman

So like you're just you're I think those people are just straight up remembering incorrectly.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. Yeah.

David Shiffman

Uh, so I was surprised at how overwhelming and clear the results are. Like when when, when 97% of people choose one option out of five, you don't really need statistics to prove that the result is significant.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. Amazing.

David Shiffman

Like you can look at that bar and say, "That bar is way, way, way higher than the other bar." Do we really need a p-value here? I would argue that you don't.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. It's fascinating. So what do you think this means for the future of how scientists and other academics and publishers connect in virtual spaces?

David Shiffman

Well, one thing that I hope it shows is that connecting in virtual spaces isn't done just because Twitter is done. That was a that was a big fear that people had that we had sort of to too large of an extent put all of our eggs in that one basket. And people have been saying for years, this is vulnerable, we are investing too much time and infrastructure in here and it can be changed. So the idea that there are other options is great. If you are someone who likes to talk about this stuff who if you are someone who thinks it's important and part of your job to communicate science to the public *you can still do that*. That that entire field is not gone now just because a formerly leading platform is terrible now.

Rahne Alexander

Well is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything we've overlooked?

David Shiffman

Sure. So, I would encourage folks to follow me on Bluesky, Why Sharks Matter, also the title of my first book with Hopkins Press. I am also at Why Sharks Matter on every platform. A really cool feature of Bluesky for when you're getting started is called a starter pack and it is any user can create a starter pack about anything. And it's just a list of a bunch of users that that they think talk about this subject interestingly. So I have one of shark science and conservation experts and I share this at my conferences and I say, "If you want to you want to sign up for Bluesky right now and immediately have your feed full of your colleagues work that is ready to go, so people can sign up and say, "Oh wow this person's here, I know them!" There are tens of

thousands of starter packs for every branch of science and academic research that are already there. Anyone can make their own. There's a searchable directory of starter packs. You could, in an hour, follow a thousand people that are interesting and relevant to your line of work.

Another thing about Bluesky that's really great is it looks a lot like Twitter, which means if you are someone who is used to Twitter, the learning curve is not very high. There are some key differences. Again, there's no algorithm, but if you know how to use Twitter, you know how to use Bluesky and that makes it easier to switch. I have also heard some people say that that sure they've recognized that Twitter is not as good as it used to be, but their followers are still there. *Maybe*, but just because they still have an account doesn't mean they're still checking it. And also, you're not reaching them because of the algorithm changes. People think, "Oh, people follow me. They're seeing my stuff." *Not anymore*. The algorithm controls what you see and what you don't see from people you follow and people you don't follow. So if you are on Twitter, you are not reaching your target audience anymore. And almost everyone who I've talked to about this, who they said who they've said, I haven't really noticed that much of a change are people who don't actually use data-driven analytics. So they're reporting entirely on vibes and feelings. Almost everyone I know who does use data driven analytics have reported a 90% or more decline in engagement on their posts where they would post something and they would get a 100 reposts now they get 10. For me it was 99%. And I was one of the most followed scientists on Twitter. I'm now one of the most followed scientists on Bluesky. The data is clear here that this isn't working. We're not welcome. Nobody wants us there. And the people controlling what gets seen are not letting what we say get seen.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. What a buzzkill.

David Shiffman

Yeah. But Bluesky is great. Come on in. Water the water's warm. The sky is blue.

Rahne Alexander

Absolutely. Absolutely. Is there anything else that you're working on that you like to talk about?

David Shiffman

Oh, so many things. Um, so I am offering professional development training courses and how to use Bluesky now when I once did it via Twitter. So anyone who wants to have me speak to your institution, I'm easy to find. I'm also at Why Sharks Matter at Gmail. But I just turned in the draft of my second book for Hopkins Press, which is all about the world of sustainable seafood.

Rahne Alexander

Oo.

David Shiffman

Um, and now I am now working on now that that's done, I'm now working on three books at the same time, which seemed like a great idea at the time.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

David Shiffman

Uh, two of which are for Hopkins Press.

Rahne Alexander

Fantastic. Well, this is very exciting. I can't wait for your second and third and fourth book.

David Shiffman

Yeah, it's been interesting.

Rahne Alexander

Cool. Cool. Well, thank you for your time, David. It's great to meet you and uh.

David Shiffman

You too.

Rahne Alexander

Have a great weekend.

David Shiffman

Thanks for having me. Yeah. Have a great rest of your day.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you for listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. Be sure to follow Hopkins Press on Bluesky as well as all and any of the other social platforms and David Shiffman as well, who you can find under the handle Why Sharks Matter on all of the platforms. You can find links to Dr. Shiffman's publications in the show notes. Thanks again and I hope you'll subscribe and tune again next time to the Hopkins Press Podcast.