

The Internet Is Dead

JD, do you ever wonder what's keeping us from wild success and all the riches of podcasting?

I don't have to wonder.

Because I know it's bots and big tech trying to keep us down.

You see, I've been doing a little bit of my own research.

Looking it up.

Googling terms.

Railing ivermectin.

Something I'd like to recommend to you and all the creamies, do your own research.

Get ready to open those third eyes, spread those chakras and decalcify those pineal glands because today we're getting into Dead Internet Theory.

Now, Dead Internet Theory does not only apply to streaming and sponsorship for independent podcasts, this goes all the way to the top.

Just what is it you ask? Well, naturally it comes from 4Chan, and here's a summary from a post:

"The internet feels empty and devoid of people. It is also devoid of content. Compared to the internet of say 2007 (and beyond) the Internet of today is entirely sterile. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do, see, read or experience anymore. It all imploded into a handful of [normal] sites and these empty husks we inhabit. Yes, the internet may seem gigantic, but it's like a hot air balloon with nothing inside."

The theory has two main points:

Point one: the internet has become increasingly centralized around larger platforms, and thus has become increasingly sterilized and controlled.

Point two: the content on these massive platforms is unoriginal, recycled, created and curated by artificial intelligence, probably as a form of social engineering.

It's never easy to find a canon when it comes to online conspiracy theories.

For instance, the first point is not really a conspiracy, it's more like the reality of economies of scale.

While researching Dead Internet Theory I came across a 2010 Wired article by Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff, which described the monopolization of the internet over the 2000s.

"The top 10 Web sites accounted for 31 percent of US pageviews in 2001, 40 percent in 2006, and about 75 percent in 2010. 'Big sucks the traffic out of small,' ... 'In theory you can have a few very successful individuals controlling hundreds of millions of people. You can become big fast, and that favors the domination of strong people.'"

Anderson and Wolff draw comparisons to the early days of railroads and telephones to illustrate that the tendency towards monopolization is repeated and predictable within industries.

So the monopolization of an industry almost doesn't qualify as a conspiracy, at least if we accept the fact that we live in a late capitalist hellscape.

Pinning down the second piece of the theory, and where it came from is a little more difficult.

Kaitlyn Tiffany's piece *Maybe You Missed It, but the Internet 'Died' Five Years Ago* in the Atlantic tracked the rise of Dead Internet Theory to a post on Agora Road's MacIntosh Cafe on January 5th, 2021 by a user named IlluminatiPirate.

Illuminati Pirate posted what they claimed was a combination of posts and discussions from 4Chan's /x/ board, and WizardChan.

JD, are you familiar with WizardChan?

Here's the Cliff Notes of the Agora Road's post:

- The 4Chan original poster (OP) started noticing the same recurring threads on 4Chan
 - OP then began to notice that posts and news stories on other social media sites were repeating
 - "I've seen news about this or that "new and unusual" or "shocking event year after year after year. But it's the same goddamn event, usually moons or asteroids."
- In 2016/2017 OP says there was a poster who seemed to not be human. OP claimed that while the poster was responsive, it seemed to be asking a lot of questions and acting very curious, almost as if it was gathering information.
 - OP said that it seemed to have a lot of knowledge and he didn't think that it was a child, but its grasp of English didn't seem quite right and the questions stuck out.
- Here's where we lose our hero, just kidding, we never had one:
 - OP has a thing for loli hentai and a foot fetish, and began to think that women - correction: girls - on the internet were more frequently into his fetish for young girls and feet.
 - OP theorizes that his posting has changed reality, that his interest, and 4Chan's interest in loli hentai is what made it more acceptable.
- OP came to believe that all western media was written and created by bots
 - "This is why anime looms so large - even a simple moe anime has heart because there's actual people behind it, and we all intuitively feel this."

- People on YouTube and TV are all NPCs, computer generated fakes, actors, politicians and YouTube personalities do not exist.
- They are created by tech companies as a guise to drive a culture war in the United States
- Like buttons are social engineering meant to keep us from questioning and disagreeing with the NPCs
 - Like buttons create sheeple, who only know how to agree and follow the latest trend
- The post pretty much wraps up with saying that image boards are the last frontier because people can speak anonymously and therefore aren't influenced by the power of the botnets.
- But uh-oh, just like any good horror story the bots are starting to break into the image boards too.

So, with those cliff-notes, and I want to be clear that the OP is a piece of shit, I don't want to make him look good I just am not gonna record myself saying a bunch of slurs and ranting about age of consent laws.

But JD, if we're just talking theory that the internet has been taken over how you feel on that?

So, I've got two main goals for the rest of this segment.

One, I want to break down the realities and the concerns around AI generated content.

Two, I want to discuss the drive and motivations behind why people believe this theory.

So, firstly, AI content.

I mean, yeah, AI is incredibly powerful, and there's a lot of bot activity online.

Imperva estimates that in 2022 42.3% of all web traffic came from bots.

This is up from 40.8% of all web traffic in 2021.

And we all interact, knowingly or unknowingly, with bots. If you're chatting with customer support there's a good chance it's a bot, Googlebot allows us to effectively search, and all the hypebeasts out there, you know you've been beaten to a drop online by a bot.

Imperva also estimates that bad bot activity (web scraping, competitive data mining, personal and financial data harvesting, brute-force login, digital ad fraud, spam, transaction fraud, etc) makes up over 25% of all web traffic.

But, there's a framing issue I came across in several articles.

Just because 40% of all activity online is conducted by bots, does not mean that 40% of all social media accounts are driven by bots.

The truth is that we don't know, and we tend to overestimate the numbers of bots, the scope of their activity, and their effects. Even reliably identifying a bot on social media is difficult.

Take Twitter. Not sure if it'll still be around when this comes out but if it doesn't, remember Twitter.

Twitter estimated in 2021 that 5% of its users are bots. A University of Southern California and Indiana University joint study estimated that it was between 9% and 15%. And botometer, a service that's meant to estimate bots, has it at 20%.

There's a common belief that an account with a long string of numbers at the end is a bot, but since 2017 new Twitter users are not initially given the option of choosing a username; they are automatically assigned a numerically original handle, which many don't bother to change.

There's also what researcher Darius Kazemi calls the "Grandpa effect." Basically, some people are just bad at social

media, and this doesn't make them bots, but it does make it more likely for people to label them as bots.

This isn't to say that bots on social media aren't an issue.

But identifying bots is difficult on a case by case basis, and doesn't become any easier when you're trying to estimate a percentage of Twitter's 330 million users. There's just no perfect way of identifying bots.

In August 2022, Twitter's CEO Parag Agrawal estimated that they removed 500,000 spam accounts every day.

Social bots exist, and we know that they have *some* influence.

But we don't know exact numbers of how many there are, and more importantly, we don't know the scope of the impact that these bots have.

We do know that people buying false engagement is a real thing.

It's a huge issue in advertising right now, in June 2022 the Association of National Advertisers estimated that ad fraud is costing US advertisers \$120 billion each year.

We can take a quick look at Aleksandr Zhukov to get an idea of how these advertising frauds can work.

Zhukov ran a company called Media Methane, which would be paid by advertising networks for placing a brand's ads on a website.

But, Zhukov's company would not place the ads on real websites. It spoofed more than 6,000 domains, rented 2,000 servers and programmed them to simulate the way a human would act on a website.

These bots used a fake mouse to scroll a fake website while falsely appearing to be signed in on Facebook.

We can also consider the use of bots in smear campaigns and disinformation.

When Amber Heard sued Johnny Depp for \$100 Million, part of the rationale was that he was using botnets and fake social media to hurt her public image.

There's a poster on Medium who goes by Roberto Leo Aquaman Bots (RLAB) whose been covering the Heard-beat for a while.

RLAB cites the fact that on Twitter there were 20,000 accounts posting regularly about Johnny Depp, but only 6,000 members in Reddit's JusticeforJohnny. But there were 10,000 Reddit members in the Pro-Amber Heard subreddit.

RLAB points out that the reason that Twitter's numbers are so inflated is because they use IPv6, while Reddit uses IPv4, this is important because it's much cheaper to create fake IP addresses and therefore fake accounts using IPv6. So much cheaper, that auto-scripts exist to create 1 million IPs to use for proxies for \$100.

We also know from Vice News' research that the conservative outlet the Daily Wire sunk between \$37,000 and \$47,000 into promoting anti-Heard sentiments by May 2022.

So, even behind the Amber Heard trial there was a lot of time and resources dedicated to smearing her public image, and I think we can say that a lot of public opinion did turn against her.

And, I think we can safely say that more resources are going into other disinformation campaigns.

Now let's also take a minute to think about the power of AI, because, holy shit.

Natural Language Processors are getting crazy good.

In 2020 the Generative Pre-trained Transformer-3 (GPT-3) was rolled out.

The GPT-3 is an autoregressive language model that uses deep learning to construct human-like text, it's like a really beefed up version of our autocomplete.

It uses the preceding value to predict and fill the current value and so on.

Only, where my phone autocompletes everything to be about Elden Ring, and can't remember the name of my own podcast, the GPT-3 is trained on 175 billion learning parameters.

Dall-E, which generates those crazy images based on input text strings, is a stripped down version of the GPT-3, by which I mean it only uses 12-billion learning parameters.

Timothy Shoup of the Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies estimated that if the GPT-3 were allowed to run wild online, within 5 years it would be responsible for between 99-99.9% of all internet content.

And the GPT-3 is not the only mega-powered AI out there, there's also the Wu Dao 2.0 which was revealed in 2021, and has 1.7 trillion learning parameters.

The Wu Dao 2.0 can learn from and interpret images as well as text.

So yes, we should all probably live in fear of the power of our AI overlords.

I for one welcome them and appreciate their kindness and just rule.

JD i don't wanna throw you under the artificially intelligent bus, how you feel about our future cyber rulers?

I do think that overall Dead Internet Theory is interesting, and there's some basis for it, AI is getting better, and the impact of bots on social media is an issue we don't fully understand.

But, what's missing from the mix of bots and the raw awe-inspiring power of our beloved AI leaders is a conspiracy.

Which, if we think back to OP's theory, is that the U.S. Government is working with corporations for social control.

This doesn't seem too far fetched to me, we know the government has done some shady shit.

And we know that anyone that's had a conversation near a phone and then opened Instagram has seen some ads that seem suspiciously relevant.

But, let's keep in mind who OP is in this case, he's a self-proclaimed right wing loli hentai enthusiast.

And he thinks that people can't be honest on social media because of like buttons.

He claims that image boards like 4Chan and 8Chan are the last bastions of free speech because you can say things anonymously.

So, on the one hand, I think there's a fear of accountability, which makes sense when you consider that he's a *4Chan /pol/ tier right wing pedophile*.

On the other hand, anyone who disagrees with his takes is either a brainwashed idiot controlled by big tech liberals, or is just a bot themselves.

This brings us to the second point: why are people drawn to this theory?

I think there's three main mechanisms at work: nostalgia, gatekeeping, and solipsism.

Here's a quote that illustrates the first two mechanisms from a text file included in the Agora Road post.

"In the beginning, the internet was only for people that knew how to use it and were able to afford it. So you ended up with a lot of people with some knowledge of value. After that, social media kicked in, people now have cell phones, it is easier and cheaper to get online and normies take over everything. Perhaps trying to be the cool kids, undermined the value and quality of posts and internet."

I think this quote is pretty clear: the internet used to be an exclusive club for people who "get it", and now they're letting the riff raff in.

It implies that there is a correct way of behaving online that has been lost.

And, I think the fact that the post was preserved and spread on Agora Road's Macintosh Cafe is important here as well.

Because Agora Road's Macintosh Cafe is styled to look like an early internet forum and the tagline is "Enjoy the best kept secret of the Internet."

It couldn't be more tailor made for aging millennials.

It's also a huge forum to discuss vaporwave, which is a music genre influenced by nostalgia for early internet culture.

No knock on vaporwave or Agora Road's Macintosh Cafe.

But doing research for this segment I read so many posts and comments about:

Yeah it was so great back in the day online. Now it's all algorithms and it sucks. People used to be so original now everything is a copy of a copy.

The vast majority of comments I read fell into this pattern.

And somehow the posters seemed oblivious to the fact that they were spouting out a cliché that's been circulating at least since the invention of the written word.

Technology changes a lot faster than people do.

And people have been complaining about the decline of civilization since they invented the fucking plough.

But this feeling, that your own experience is more valid, that you're the free thinker in a world full of brainwashed sheep, bots, and people who've never had an original thought brings us to solipsism.

Solipsism is "the doctrine that, in principle, "existence" means for me my existence and that of my mental states. Existence is everything that I experience—physical objects, other people, events and processes—anything that would commonly be regarded as a constituent of the space and time in which I coexist with others and is necessarily construed by me as part of the content of my consciousness."

(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

We can see this in the Dead Internet Theory, but specifically, we can understand solipsism through the term NPC.

In a videogame an NPC is a Non-Playable Character, but the term has spread online and now there's a wojak meme with the little gray guy with the sharp nose.

Anyway, the meme is used to insult a person or a group of people by implying that they have no consciousness and are simply repeating what they were programmed to say.

Dead Internet Theory suggests that the internet is almost entirely populated by either bots, or people who are influenced by them, in essence, NPCs.

And I think solipsism is an important position to consider philosophically, because, yes, we do only ever have access to our own lived experience, but this is only a starting point.

So really quick, I'd like to run through a critique of solipsism by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the language daddy himself.

Our experience, and the experience of others is not truly private, he argues.

Wittgenstein starts by establishing two forms of privacy, something is private if only I can know it, or if only I can have it.

We'll stick with pain as an example.

Let's say I hurt my hand opening a jar of dill pickles, again.

If we're operating under a solipsistic point of view then we would say that only I can know that I am in pain.

Very emo, right?

But, this breaks down into two conjunctions: firstly, that only I can know that I am in pain when I am in pain.

Secondly, that others cannot know that I am in pain when I am in pain.

Point one, Wittgenstein says, is complete bullshit, of course you know that you are in pain, you're the one in pain, what does knowledge have to do with it?

Point two, is false, because the executive producer heard me screaming in the kitchen, so she knows that I am in pain when I am in pain.

On the second point of privacy, the fact that only I can have my pain, that's purely grammatical, because if I asked Bia

to open the pickle jar and she hurt her hand, pain tolerance notwithstanding, we would both experience the same pain.

My pickle jar pain is unique to me, of course, in the moment that I am experiencing it, it is mine to experience, but it is also mine to express and to annoy everyone around me with.

If we lived in a solipsistic world, then talking about any of your feelings would be pointless, because any of the NPCs you're surrounded with would have no understanding of the rich internal world you live in.

But, we live among people, and even though we don't have direct access to other's thoughts, we do have shared understanding through language.

So this is basically the end of my spiel, there are bots on the internet, and AI is pretty powerful.

But, that doesn't mean that everyone who disagrees with you online is not a full person.

Your inability to imagine that someone may have a different lived experience than you doesn't make you right, but it makes you an asshole.

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