

Episode Outline: Dead Internet Theory

Intro

- Housekeeping
- Regarding sources for this episode, I have many, and they will be made available in the outline we publish along with the episode. That being said, I have a handful I want to mention upfront because they were most important to shaping the overall narrative here.
 - My primary source for explaining the concept of today's episode is Kaitlyn Tiffany's ["Maybe You Missed It, but the Internet 'Died' Five Years Ago"](#) published in *The Atlantic* in August 2021.
 - I've actually read this one and it's a great breakdown of the concept.
 - That article also pulls heavily from a post in January 2021 on *Agora Road's Macintosh Cafe* by a user named Illuminati Pirate titled ["Dead Internet Theory: Most of the Internet is Fake."](#) This post is generally credited as the first major published exploration of the concept, but I'm gonna talk about that later in the episode.

- Don't know how much I can trust a guy with a name like that.
- Another source that will play out more in a future episode, but is fundamental to my interest in the overall topic is James Bridle's Medium post ["Something is wrong on the internet"](#) in November of 2017.
- Lastly, as a great primer, I can't praise ["It's All FAKE | The Dead Internet Theory"](#) by The Why Files enough. This video was posted in March of this year. All hail Hecklefish.
- It's always Lizzid People.

Ye Olde Internet

- So before we dive into the larger topic of dead internet theory, I would like to take some time to talk about the internet that was. Specifically, what we remember from the early days of the internet, pre-2000.
- My own first exposure to the Internet was WebTV. I think around 1997 or 1998. I didn't have the hardware, but the family that watched my brother and me after school a few days a week did.
 - For me, the highlight was being able to go to Nintendo.com and see if there was upcoming video game news. Later I would try to get Internet time when I

could and have my first e-mail address at eleven or twelve.

- Mine was going to a friend's house and going to any URL I could think of. An early one I used to go to was Joel Hodgson's Gizmonics.com when it was the ant site. I actually got online in '99 or so because of Yahoo chat and then discovered webcomics by accident. I'm still kinda friends with Pete Abrams of Sluggy Freelance.
- So, let's talk about what the internet is, or at least what the intention was. I am working with ["Brief History of the Internet" from InternetSociety.Org](#).
 - The history and the development is pretty complicated and there is a lot of depth to it, but the first concept of a network of social interactions that would lead to the internet was in a series of memos by JCR Licklider of MIT in August 1962 under the term "galactic network" which was envisioned to be a global network of connected computers where data could be exchanged. Licklider was the first head of computer research at DARPA in October 1962. It was at DARPA that the Internet would begin to take shape.

- By 1967, ARPANET was beginning to form, with the first official node on the network arriving in 1969 at UCLA.
- At this time what we may consider the internet was a centralized series of protocols, but it became important that for this to expand, multiple independent networks of different designs would need to be able to interface. Thus, the open-architecture network.
- What we see as the World Wide Web, the polished, viewer-friendly interface for exploring the internet, was developed by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN in 1991. It is also where hyperlinks first appeared, allowing for data to be accessed much more readily.
- I think we need to talk about the inspiration Douglas Adams played in this because a lot of early internet terminology and ideas came from the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Also, Monty Python. It's called spam for a reason.
- As far as what we consider the internet to be, it has three components, as explained in [a Vox article titled "The Internet, explained" by Timothy B. Lee](#) published in 2015.
 - What is dubbed "the last mile" is how we are talking right now; this is the connection of homes and small businesses to the internet. This includes cable

companies providing access and towers for wireless connection.

- The next level would be the data centers that host sites and apps. I'd argue that this is where most of what we consider the internet to actually be today as where most of our idea of "regulation" and "standards" come into play.
- Lastly, at the deepest level would be described as "the backbone" which is the long-distance connections between data centers and consumers.
- Because of this decentralized network, the internet does not really have any regulatory bodies in anything but spirit. Any connections and standards are voluntary given an FCC issue or two.
 - The best sort of answer to who runs the whole thing that we can muster is the Internet Engineering Task Force which is an open organization that makes suggestions. Generally, their guidance is accepted, but data centers and cable companies are not forced to listen to this.
 - Secondly is the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers, ICANN. They are generally responsible for the distribution of domains and IP addresses, but that

is about it. They're just basically giving you an ID number in a larger network so you can be found.

- Don't get me started on domain squatting. . .
- Thirdly, the World Wide Web Consortium is a lot like the IETF in that it can make suggestions, but nobody is forced to adopt them.
- So in a lot of ways, what we know as the internet, especially a while back, was basically a frontier.

Today's Internet

- So, what is going on with the internet of today?
- I understand it involves step brothers and sisters.
- As for where we are today, I am going to quote from an article titled ["404 Page Not Found: The internet feeds on its own dying dreams" by Kate Wagner for the Baffler](#) in 2019. Quote:
 - "Writing in 2008, the new media scholar Geert Lovink separated internet culture into three periods:
 - First, the scientific, precommercial, text-only period before the World Wide Web. Second, the euphoric, speculative period in which the Internet opened up for the general audience, culminating in the

- late 1990s dotcom mania. Third, the post-dot-com crash/post-9/11 period, which is now coming to a close with the Web 2.0 mini-bubble.
- We need to pour one out for pets.com and the sock puppet dog.
- For those my age, this tripartite history of the net begins at number two, with the anarchic, sprawling, '90s net, followed by the post-9/11, pre-iPhone variety(including the blogosphere and the fulcrum moment that was Myspace), and ending with today's app-driven, hyper-conglomerate social media net."
- Today's internet feels less like an assemblage of oddities and more like a guided tour through curated experiences where we begin to experience things in cycles.
- It's like the entire internet has become an AOL browser.
 - I quote Kaitlyn Tiffany from **The Atlantic**: "Most weeks, Twitter is taken over by an argument about how best to practice personal hygiene, or which cities have the worst food and air quality, which somehow devolves into allegations of classism and accusations of murder, which for whatever reason is actually not as offensive as classism anymore. A celebrity is sorry. A music video has broken the internet. A meme

has gotten popular and then boring. "Bennifer Might Be Back On, and No One's More Excited Than Twitter." At this point, you could even say that the point of the theory is so obvious, it's cliché—people talk about longing for the days of weird web design and personal sites and listservs all the time. Even Facebook employees say they miss the "old" internet. The big platforms do encourage their users to make the same conversations and arcs of feeling and cycles of outrage happen over and over, so much so that people may find themselves acting like bots, responding on impulse in predictable ways to things that were created, in all likelihood, to elicit that very response."

- The internet, if it is to be considered a collection of human knowledge and experience in the most optimistic sense, seems to have failed in that regard and has fallen into repetition.
- I advise everyone to go out and start your own angelfire site again and start abandoning Facebook.
- This is because in a network where no standards can be upheld by regulatory action, standards are determined by influence and this is usually in the form of corporations.

- The corporatization of the internet is single handedly responsible for the sweeping changes in the internet of our youth and the internet of today and is going to factor into this larger Dead Internet Theory.
 - Another thing to take into account is the larger iceberg concept of the internet. What we see is only a small portion of the total network activity that makes up the internet, and much of that activity is automated processes, backend databases, and bots.
 - ARE YOU DEPRESSED YET, KIDS?!?

The Dead Internet Theory

- As for what the Dead Internet Theory is, here is the most Laconic version I can come up with pulled from my sources:
the dead internet theory is the idea that vast portions of what we assume are human-produced content on the internet are actually created by artificial intelligence in conjunction with organizations to create a method of social and economic influence.
 - I said the most Laconic version I can and if you've listened to any of my episodes before you know I can be a bit verbose.

- I quote *The Atlantic* article's summary of the forum post that we're going to pull some evidence from. This is Kaitlyn Tiffany again:
 - "Peppered with casually offensive language, the post suggests that the internet died in 2016 or early 2017, and that now it is "empty and devoid of people," as well as "entirely sterile." Much of the "supposedly human-produced content" you see online was actually created using AI, IlluminatiPirate claims, and was propagated by bots, possibly aided by a group of "influencers" on the payroll of various corporations that are in cahoots with the government. The conspiring group's intention is, of course, to control our thoughts and get us to purchase stuff."
 - Even if this isn't true, you should look at anything online as suspicious. Even us.
- So with that in mind, I want to cover some of the evidence suggested in the thread by IlluminatiPirate.

Evidence

- Now, the first thing I need to point out is that while I pride myself in finding academic sources in most episodes I write, I am going to be relying heavily on what appear to be seemingly insane ramblings of a 4chaner.

- Where would we be without deranged children these days?
- So, the origins of this theory, based on what IlluminatiPirate posted, originates from 4chan's /x/ board and Wizardchan. Obviously given chan culture most of this stuff could be seen as trolling or a dumb joke, but elements of what IP posits here struck enough people to merit some real discussion on the idea that the internet may be dead.
 - IP begins by giving us his credentials in that he was fairly active on the internet prior to about 2007 during that post dotcom bubble period. He then posits the internet feels empty and devoid of people and content which, naturally, he blames on corporations and governments. However, he then launches into a series of claims that may feel pretty familiar to many of us.
 - One observation: regular contacts vanishing completely. He lays out that he had a solid number of contacts across different sites, but those contacts eventually vanished, and he argues not necessarily from a change in interests, but a complete abandonment, as he describes as "vanishing in a puff of smoke" like the shutdown of a program. This

connects with another observation he makes that fake people are out there. Again, he is not entirely wrong here, which we will explain.

- Alternately, he might be an asshole and tedious to be around.
- A second observation: Algorithmic content. This is a bit more of a rant on the quality of media we consume these days, but IP poses that fiction has become sterile and templated. IP suggests that modern fiction is being manufactured by artificial intelligence, which he is not necessarily too far off base.
 - But then he goes on to praise moe anime as having heart, so I think he is probably just a big weeaboo.
 - We're also living in a world where most scripts and books are based on the formula from the books "Save the Cat" which is about screenwriting and storytelling and you can figure out where a movie is going beat for beat if you know what to look for.
- Lastly, the internet is often different among observers. He points out that the internet you see on your smartphone is different from the one you see on

your PC. Specifically, he mentions spending a few days looking at websites between these two platforms and noticing that at irregular intervals that the content will be completely different on the same website across the two platforms.

- I buy this less, but I am noting it because the idea is interesting and I believe it could be possible for algorithmically generated content to slip up periodically.

- This is the one I actually buy into. I have completely different experiences on Facebook depending on if I'm on PC or mobile. PC I see posts from my friends. On mobile it's almost all suggested posts and influencers. Same on Insta. I'm glad this got brought up.

- Now, from this point on, IP tends to go into conspiracy overdrive. He establishes a timeline that leads to somewhere about 2016 and 2017 when AI takes over the internet that we see today.
 - His timeline begins in 2004 with the folding of [DARPA's Lifelog project](#)... or was it actually folded? Facebook arrives in 2004.

- From 2004 to 2012, the NSA may have picked up the former DARPA project, spinning it into the ["Total Informational Awareness" project](#) meant to 'fight terrorism.'
- In 2012/2013, [the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act](#) was modified by Congress to allow domestic dissemination of government-produced programming within the United States, which IP suggests legalizes government propaganda.
- Not to get all Hecklefish here, but I buy this so far.
- From 2012 to 2016, IP suggests that any DARPA and NSA contracts were given to private companies such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon.
 - Now I had a hard time digging up some articles about these contracts, but the association between [the NSA and tech giants is a known thing](#), so I can see this as plausible. I just lack the sources at the moment.
- In 2016, Google started work on a concept called [Selfish Ledger](#), and we got our first hints of it through leaked memos in 2018.

- I feel we could do a whole episode on this one.

Maybe as a minisode or something because this one is pretty scary.

- Is this when they took the “don’t be evil” thing out of their mission statement?

- Google, again, shows up. In 2016, Google released a host of [neural-linguistic machine learning programs](#).
- In 2017, the concept of the deepfake begins to appear a lot more commonly in the public’s consciousness.
- In 2018, IP points out that vote and view counts across different platforms [are over-inflated](#).
- Naturally, the conclusion that IP draws here is that the government is utilizing artificial intelligence to exert control of the population through corporate contractors.
 - Which honestly doesn’t sound overly crazy.
 - It certainly makes me want to build a bunker and drop off the grid.

Reality

- What I want to do here is wrap up a bit with an exploration of some of the reality of this idea that helps to support the idea of an AI-controlled “dead internet.”
- Let’s talk about the idea of Fake People, which was an element of some of the signs IP discussed in his thread.

- We should be familiar with the concept of deep fakes, yes?
 - These have been showing up more and more and we could easily explore deep fakes as an episode, especially if we want to dip into the conspiratorial well.
 - A deep fake is generally created through a combination of human and machine learning, and to a large degree, it takes human input to make a successful deep fake.
 - Even [AI-generated images](#), such as [composite avatars](#) used for sock-puppets and bot accounts, require an element of human curation. After all, someone has to be able to throw out the ones with the extra ear, eyes, or strange neck folds.
 - It can be scarily effective, such as in the case of [Adobe's Project VoCo](#) which allows you to dynamically edit transcribed audio and then play back that transcription with a soundalike.
 - Clark is using this stuff to make ads for the station with celeb voices. It's cute until it isn't.
- The Dead Internet Theory is predicated on a combination of AI and government and corporate influence to generate these sorts of fake people and this seems reasonable.

- Do I believe the NSA has a bunch of people in a basement churning out fake avatars to get people to buy more iPhones? Not so much, but I do think this is stuff that is currently being experimented with by governments and by private companies.
- Well I kinda do believe it judging by some of the interactions I've had lately on social media.
- For the real pants-shitting implication of something like this though, think about what might happen when AI gets so good at these sorts of tasks that the human factor is reduced to little more than someone who initially activated the thing. At least these are just images and sounds that we can suss out, right?
 - It's not like realistic, algorithmically generated conversations are a thing and can be seen.
 - Try talking to any tech support or customer service chat and tell me that crap seems human.
- Oh shit, let's talk about algorithmically generated content on social media.
 - We already know a lot about how replies on social media are a crapshoot on whether they come from a human or not. Twitter bots have grown fairly

convincing as, and this is my hot take, conversational discourse on social media has gone down the toilet.

- AGREED. I wonder if anyone thinks I'm a bot?
 - You're more likely to find someone who can disagree with you amicably and not call you a dickhead than you are to see proper punctuation in many tweets.
 - I mean, we can still tell most bot responses from people, but the line is growing blurrier and blurrier on high-traffic social media websites. We're talking about the biggest ones, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, AKA 90% of the internet for the layman.
 - Again, this is AOL all over again.
- In that regard, I just want us to take a moment to check out [the Subreddit Simulator](#). This is a subreddit that uses AI to generate dynamic posts and comments based on algorithmic scrapping of the biggest subreddits on the platform. The results can be scary.
 - The project is not without its flaws. Some of the questions and responses can be nonsensical, but the cadence and texture feel real at times.
 - Now, my last point before here is regarding the idea of the DARPA Lifelog. It strikes me that such a system is actually

in place and we can see it in action in China. Have you two heard of [the Social Credit System](#)?

- Yes. A guy disproving "chi martial artists" has had his score drop so low he can't take trains to matches and has to drive. It's deeply frightening how little he can legally do now.

- I don't want to spend a ton of time on this as I would like to explore it in another way in the future but in a summary of a very complex topic...

A sign of something dark...

- Now, we have mentioned bots quite a bit so far, and there is more to it, but I am going to be diving into that subject more in a future episode. The artificial intelligence component of all of this goes a little deeper than I can comfortably deliver in this episode, especially as I believe it has a connection to another unsavory element of internet weirdness we'll get into another time.
 - I want to tackle bots in particular for a few reasons, namely because I think if we are talking about AI we should consider the increasing role and traffic of bots and how bots replicate. Next time we tackle this subject, we will need to talk about ["the inversion."](#)

- What I want to do here, however, is leave you with a theory that I am building that is based on the larger dead internet theory.
 - When we next tackle this subject I want to explore the idea that the internet is not dead, really, but is infected with cancer - and the cancer is taking over.

Reviews

- **Bobby11d - ***
 - These two guys haven't read any books on what they are talking about. And then proceed to tell the listeners that the author is crazy or whatever. This show is not very good.
- **Kuruki! - ***
 - It's absolutely wrenching to listen to a pair of idiots ramble for clicks.
- **Spookydicebag - *******
 - This show is well researched and the hosts are not only funny, but willing to call out the shortcomings surrounding many of these topics; while being able keep everything entertaining.

Questions

- **Ghostforge – Today at 7:05 PM**

- If the Dead Internet is real, how long do you think it'll be before the bots either hivemind into sapience, or begin interacting with each other on their own initiative, kickstarting an emergent culture? Also will Pope Sex-Fucker be their king?

- **Sam – Today at 7:06 PM**

- Since ghost took the SFW slot, would the dead Internet theory being real hurt or help the porn industry And why

- **kickassatron – Today at 7:36 PM**

- What's the real difference between us talking to an AI versus a real person?