

The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet

This is also what the internet is becoming: a dark forest



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Photo by Rosie Fraser on Unsplash

In his sci-fi trilogy *The Three Body Problem*, author Liu Cixin presents the dark forest theory of the universe.

When we look out into space, the theory goes, we're struck by its silence. It seems like we're the only ones here. After all, if other forms of life existed, wouldn't they show themselves? Since they haven't, we assume there's no one else out there.

Liu invites us to think about this a different way.

Imagine a dark forest at night. It's deathly quiet. Nothing moves. Nothing stirs. This could lead one to assume that the forest is devoid of life. But of course, it's not. The dark forest is full of life. It's quiet because night is when the predators come out. To survive, the animals stay silent.

Is our universe an empty forest or a dark one? If it's a dark forest, then only Earth is foolish enough to ping the heavens and announce its presence. The rest of the universe already knows the real reason why the forest stays dark. It's only a matter of time before the Earth learns as well.

This is also what the internet is becoming: a dark forest.

In response to the ads, the tracking, the trolling, the hype, and other predatory behaviors, we're retreating to our dark forests of the internet, and away from the mainstream.

This very piece is an example of this. This theory was first shared on a private channel sent to 500 people who I know or who have explicitly chosen to receive it. This is the online environment in which I feel most secure. Where I can be my most "real self."

These are all spaces where depressurized conversation is possible because of their non-indexed, non-optimized, and non-gamified environments.

Podcasts are another example. There, meaning isn't just expressed through language, but also through intonation and interaction. Podcasts are where a bad joke can still be followed by a self-aware and self-deprecating save. It's a more forgiving space for communication than the internet at large.

Dark forests like newsletters and podcasts are growing areas of activity. As are other dark forests, like Slack channels, private Instagrams, invite-only message boards, text groups, Snapchat, WeChat, and on and on. This is where Facebook is pivoting with Groups (and trying to redefine what the word "privacy" means in the process).

These are all spaces where depressurized conversation is possible because of their non-indexed, non-optimized, and non-gamified environments. The cultures of those spaces have more in common with the physical world than the internet.

The internet of today is a battleground. The idealism of the '90s web is gone. The web 2.0 utopia—where we all lived in rounded filter bubbles of happiness—ended with the 2016 Presidential election when we learned that the tools we thought were only life-giving could be weaponized too. The public and semi-public spaces we created to develop our identities, cultivate communities, and gain knowledge were overtaken by forces using them to gain power of various kinds (market, political, social, and so on).

This is the atmosphere of the mainstream web today: a relentless competition for power. As this competition has grown in size and ferocity, an increasing number of the population has scurried into their dark forests to avoid the fray.

The web 2.0 era has been replaced by a new “Web²” era. An age where we simultaneously live in many different internets, whose numbers increase hourly. The dark forests are growing.

The dark forests grow because they provide psychological and reputational cover. They allow us to be ourselves because we know who else is there. Compared to the free market communication style of the mass channels—with their high risks, high rewards, and limited moderation—dark forest spaces are more Scandinavian in their values and the social and emotional security they provide. They cap the downsides of looking bad and the upsides of our best jokes by virtue of a contained audience.

This is a trade more and more people are looking to make.



The Bowling Alley Theory of the Internet

I went dark on the internet a few years ago. I took social apps off my phone, unfollowed everyone, the whole shebang. This was without a doubt a good decision. I've been happier and have had better control over my time since. Many others have done this and are doing this. A generation of modern wannabe monks.

But even as my personal wellness grows, I see a risk in this change.

You could argue that these decisions removed me from the arena. I detached from the mainstream of conversation. I stopped watching TV. I stopped looking at Facebook and Twitter. I silenced my voice on the platforms where the conversation was happening because of the strings, risks, and side effects they created in return.

This detachment wasn't just in politics. It was also true of how I shared my personal life. Milestones for me and my family were left unshared beyond our internet dark forests, even though many more friends and members of our families would've been happy to hear about them.

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underestimating how powerful the mainstream
channels will continue to be.*

Not sharing was my choice, of course, and I didn't question it. My alienation from the mainstream was their loss, not mine. But did this choice also deprive me of some greater reward?

Not everyone who joined a bowling league (when people did such things) loved bowling. Many loved being with other people first and bowling came second or not at all. Being together is what mattered. The venue did not.

This is the Bowling Alley Theory of the Internet: that people are online purely to meet each other, and in the long run the venues where we congregate are an unimportant background compared to the interactions themselves. Did we meet on MySpace, Tinder, or LinkedIn? Does it matter?

When I went offline for reasons of personal wellness and productivity, I stopped going to the bowling alleys altogether. But lately, I've started to question that decision.

I'm reminded of what happened in the 1970s when the hippies—bruised and bloodied from the culture wars of the '60s—retreated into self-help, wellness, and personal development, as Adam Curtis documents in his series *The Century of Self*. While they turned inward, the winners of the '60s culture wars took society's reins. A focus on personal wellness created an unintended side effect: a retreat from the public arena, and a shift in the distribution of power ever since.

It's possible, I suppose, that a shift away from the mainstream internet and into the dark forests could permanently limit the mainstream's influence. It could delegitimize it. In some ways that's the story of the internet's effect on broadcast television. But we forget how powerful television still is. And those of us building dark forests risk underestimating how powerful the mainstream channels will continue to be, and how minor our havens are compared to their immensity.

The influence of Facebook, Twitter, and others is enormous and not going away. There's a reason why Russian military focused on these platforms when they wanted to manipulate public opinion: they have a real impact. The meaning and tone of these platforms changes with who uses them. What kind of bowling alley it is depends on who goes there.

Should a significant percentage of the population abandon these spaces, that will leave nearly as many eyeballs for those who are left to influence, and limit the influence of those who departed on the larger world they still live in.

If the dark forest isn't dangerous already, these departures might ensure it will be.

