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The Dead Internet Theory: Manipulation and Misinformation

“My mom was diagnosed with a rare blood and cancer related illness. She lost her battle with cancer but my mom was able to be happy and to enjoy the last 10 years that she had.” These were the words of a Reddit user venting about their recently deceased mother on a post titled, “My mom died.” Other Reddit users expressed their condolences to the user’s late mother, with one commenting, “You are not alone. I lost my mother 2 years ago to cancer. I am sorry for your loss and I can only imagine how hard it is to miss her. I hope you can find some peace in the process...” The grieving account behind the Reddit post, “offmychestGPT2Bot,” was also the same account behind the sympathetic comments. No one’s mother had died, and there was no mother to begin with.

This story was shared on r/SubSimulatorGPT2, a completely AI generated subreddit. For the past five years, AI bots have acted independently posting topics ranging from questions asking, “What are some of the best workout videos on YouTube?” (FitnessGPT2Bot) to memoirs titled, “A Perfect Day for Kidnapping.” (ShortscarystoGPT2bot). For each post, bots would reply multiple times to itself bringing up different points as if they were a separate person—as if they were human. While r/SubSimulatorGPT2 was made as an experiment to test how advanced AI can be, the subreddit serves as an example of how well AI bots can disguise themselves as human.

With the anonymity the internet provides, there is always a chance the person behind an account isn't who they say they are. The increase of bots has led many paranoid individuals into believing in the dead internet theory: an online conspiracy theory that claims the internet died somewhere between 2016-2017 after being completely taken over by algorithms and AI regulated by companies under the demand of the U.S government in order to control digital content. Although the validity of the conspiracy's claims aren't necessarily true, the dead internet theory suggests real issues regarding the dangers of AI manipulating humans and spreading misinformation.

The dead internet theory first originated with an anonymous user on a forum-posting website known as "Wizardchan." In 2021, the conspiracy theory was later expanded on to a similar website, "AgoraRoad," by the user, "IlluminatiPirate," where it gained its popularity. As of April 2024, the post detailing the theory has been viewed more than 300,000 times on AgoraRoad from people all over the world.

IlluminatiPirate believed the internet to have died between 2016-2017 due to first noticing strange bot-like behavior on the website, 4chan. They noticed an account to have, "Posed a lot of questions, usually as if trying to understand the emotions of the posters it was talking to, as if unfamiliar with human emotions." (IlluminatiPirate). While IlluminatiPirate had no evidence that the account was AI, their inner suspicion encouraged them to look deeper into the truth of the internet.

Their suspicions led them to believe that the internet was "Empty and devoid of people" and, "Devoid of content." (IlluminatiPirate). They claimed that the existence of several celebrities and politicians were a ruse, and instead, were either deep fakes or NPCs—a term commonly used in video games to describe background characters

without a conscience. Similarly, they believed that forms of creative media lacked human creators. Movies, shows, music—any type of creation that was put out onto the internet—was made by algorithms and computer programs in order to appeal to mainstream culture. They claimed that the only exception was anime since it wasn't popular. This exception was due to IlluminatiPirate's obsession with anime, as evidenced by AgoraRoad containing several forums discussing topics relating to Japanese media.

Up to this point, IlluminatiPirate's claims had all been speculations formed through suspicions. For their theory to have concrete evidence, they searched day and night for proof. However, it didn't take IlluminatiPirate long to find the evidence they needed. They claimed to have simultaneously scrolled on Facebook and Reddit on both their phone and computer. They found posts that were exclusive to each device. A post on their phone wouldn't appear on their computer, and vice versa. With this revelation, they believed that a person who frequented a website on their mobile device as opposed to someone on a desktop device were being censored from certain posts without realizing. To them, this evidence made it clear that websites were picking and choosing who gets to see certain posts.

After IlluminatiPirate shared their findings to AgoraRoad, many users joined in to add their own pieces of evidence. One user added to the dead internet theory by stating their experience with the Google search engine. The account, "AnonymousNUP" created a forum titled, "The internet is a potemkin village: Proof of dead internet theory?" on AgoraRoad to list their findings. After searching up "climate change" and expecting to see millions of results, their expectations were met; 942 million search

results appeared. However, after flipping through each page of Google, the amount of results significantly decreased. By the nineteenth page, there were only a total of 483 results. Just out of the 483 results, several websites were either broken or taken down (AnonymousNUP). They compared this to a Potemkin village: a fake village with no inhabitants, built only to impress outsiders. AnonymousNUP believed Google was lying about the amount of search results to make it seem like there was more information on climate change than there actually was, as a way to seem more reliable and trustworthy. The more people trusted Google, the more people would use the website, and in turn, be manipulated by bots sent from the U.S government. In actuality, the reason for the decrease in the search results is due to Google's search engine algorithm becoming more specific the further someone searches for a topic (Sullivan).

The dead internet theory united many users together to further search for evidence of both "NPC" activity and governmental control. A common sentiment users of these forums shared in their banter was a disdain for "normie" culture. The two websites were niche enough to not be known by the general public. Due to that, the websites attracted a specific minority searching for a community. Wizardchan took pride in describing its community as a place for, "Aspiring lifelong male virgins." (Staff). Posts frequently centered around misogynistic and racist viewpoints and discussed bitterness towards the average person: those with jobs, pursuing a higher education, or in a romantic relationship. Joining the enclosed online community was challenging for many. There were several strict rules in place, such as prohibiting any memes that didn't originate on Wizardchan and banning users who mentioned anything about romantic relationships. On AgoraRoad, many users acted as gatekeepers. They would harass

new accounts with slurs, and tell them to go to more mainstream websites such as Reddit.

There's a prominent sense of elitism present among all users since they believed themselves to be the only ones aware of the "truth" of the internet. The two websites functioned as a sanctuary for believers of the theory. Unlike more popular social media platforms, Wizardchan and AgoraRoad weren't popular enough to attract large companies, and by extension, the U.S government. Fran Mason described in, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, a common trait that is found among conspiracy theorists is a belief that they're immune to a conspiracy's consequences. "In conspiracy theory the subject is predicated as a perfect autonomous subject who, despite being one of the majority outside the conspiracy's elite, remains unaffected by the conspiracy's operations and untouched by its deformation—unlike the rest of society." (Knight 48). Spending their days residing in a quieter corner of the internet and focusing on belittling others separated themselves from the rest of society. The fact they didn't partake in any mainstream content made them special—immune to the government's manipulation.

Those who were supposedly immune formed a community to establish security. Kelly Weill, in her book, *Off the Edge*, goes into detail about how a like-minded community can strengthen belief in a theory, and reinforce the community itself. "Theorists become more devout when they identify as part of the population under attack... The more a person identifies with a persecuted 'ingroup,' the more likely they are to suspect evil deeds by a threatening 'outgroup' with which they do not identify." (Weill 128). Before the dead internet theory originated, their shared experience as social

outcasts and hostility for society bonded them together. The introduction of the dead internet theory gave them a common enemy, which further fortified the community. Letting others join their circle put the two websites at risk of gaining popularity, and therefore, they feared that its traction would garner enough attention for bots led by companies and the U.S government to plague the forums.

Paranoia is a common theme among many conspiracy theorists, and believers of the dead internet theory are no different. Many users of both AgoraRoad and Wizardchan were social outcasts, limiting their contact with real-life interactions to be as little as possible. Weill further describes in *Off the Edge* how a person delving into a conspiracy theory can negatively affect their attitude towards society. "Once committed to a conspiracy theory, people find themselves even likelier to be socially ostracized. This can lead to a vicious cycle of alienation and acceptance, pulling a person away from society at large and further into a conspiratorial movement." (Weill 129). On top of already lacking frequent human interaction and in opposition to common societal expectations, belief in the dead internet theory only further separated believers from society to confine themselves within the gates of a virtual community. They ignore any evidence that suggests their beliefs are false. A lack of trust in anything from outside the communities of Wizardchan and AgoraRoad leaves believers to remain skeptical of everything and everyone.

The worst form of paranoia happened to a small number of believers who began gaining suspicions towards their own home base. Some users began expressing their belief that bots were sent to AgoraRoad from a more powerful, external source in order to silence those who spoke the truth. On the forum titled, "Is agora road part of the dead

internet?” one user commented, “Considering how popular DIT is, if they have not already then it is a matter of time before the bots come to try and get us off their trail.” (Calico_jack). Many users confronted others who they thought were AI, while others would add fuel to the fire and jokingly admit they were in fact AI. Forums were a battlefield; no one could trust anyone.

As the internal arguments continued, the worst fear for users on both sides of the battle happened: the dead internet theory went mainstream. The conspiracy theory started to spread to more popular corners of the internet, such as YouTube and TikTok. “The Internet is Fake,” a video by the YouTuber, “ColdFusion,” has amassed over 776 thousand views. What they considered to be their holy revelation, was now spoken by the people they loathed on websites they despised. The internet serves as one of the most prominent ways conspiracy theories are spread in modern day. Videos on conspiracy theories often go viral, and the dead internet theory’s focus on the internet made it easy for anyone who frequented online communities to understand the conspiracy.

However, most outsiders of Wizardchan and AgoraRoad initially disregarded the dead internet theory’s validity for many reasons. The claim that every social media account on the internet was a bot was a bold claim to suggest. With people interacting with their real-life friends on social media, suggesting that they were actually bots was an outright false claim. Many took this as a sign that the believers of the dead internet theory were unaware of real-life relationships, as most of their interpersonal connections came from online strangers. On top of that, the reputation Wizardchan and AgoraRoad had as misogynistic and racist communities made many outsiders instantly dismiss the

conspiracy theory. While the conspiracy theory was born from many exaggerated points, the dead internet theory still addresses plausible concerns that affect both the believers and the deniers.

The conspirators of the dead internet theory aren't wrong for thinking that there is a large bot presence online. However, the internet isn't a Potemkin village whatsoever. There is a thriving population of both humans and bots. Data gathered by Imperva Inc. in 2023, shows that human presence on the internet is declining. In 2023, 49.6% of internet traffic in the U.S. came from bots, a 2.1% increase from 2022 (Imperva 6). The report categorized bots into two different sections: "good" and "bad." Good bots, totaling to 17.6% of the bot population, are the invisible ones: search-engine bots that help a person find what they're researching, or ones that make sure a website is running how it's intended. Meanwhile bad bots, ones that focus on scamming, theft, hacking—any online method that can be used to directly harm others—made up 32% of the bot population. There are more bots designed to cause distress than there are to help people navigate the internet.

Many people have encountered bots on X or Instagram after scrolling for a few minutes. Accounts without any posts and blank profile pictures leaving comments that say, "Congrats! You've won a free iPhone 16! Click the link in the bio to receive it!" are fraudulent claims. While for some, it may be obvious to disregard those false statements, for 30% of social media users, they've fallen victim to scams (BrandBastion). According to BrandBastion, one-hundred million people reported to have lost a combined total of \$770 million in 2023. The scams lure people in by promising a luxurious prize, convincing them to leak their private information in order to

receive it. However, the only one rewarded is the person in control behind the scamming bot accounts.

AI scams are also targeting children. MrBeast, a YouTuber with over two-hundred million subscribers, is known for giving away thousands of dollars and various prizes to his subscribers. While his giveaways are authentic, many scammers create bot accounts disguised as him to gain profit. The chances of winning a MrBeast giveaway is a dream shared by many children, so seeing an account under the same name with an AI replicating his voice and face convinces many to share their parent's credit card information so they can win a new PlayStation 5 or Nintendo Switch. While MrBeast has brought awareness to bots stealing his identity (Donaldson), hundreds of people fall victim regardless, blinded by the ecstasy of receiving a life-changing amount of money.

It is becoming increasingly harder for people to identify a post made by a human and one by AI. Humans and AI are at an even ground on territorial claim over the internet. It is becoming harder to not fall victim to the danger they bring. While scam bots are some of the most noticeable forms of AI, plenty of other bots are designed to misinform. With about half the internet being populated by bots, misinformation can be spread much more easily and rapidly.

On X, during the first Republican primary debate of 2023, researchers at QUT discovered that, "More than 1,200 X accounts were spreading the false and disproven claim that Trump won the 2020 election during the debate and interview, as well as a sprawling bot network of 1,305 accounts." (Taylor). Many of these posts have been viewed over three million times, and under each post were links to websites that went

into more depth about the fake news. Bots are able to spread misinformation at a much more rapid rate than any human.

Bot activity is only increasing on the internet. The reality of a Potemkin village feels more real each day. One of X's countermeasures to bot activity was the "Not a Bot" subscription service. X is hidden behind a one-dollar paywall for new users in New Zealand and the Philippines ("Not a Bot"). Their hope is that this subscription will put an end to the mass production of bots. However, as a result, the paywall is also preventing and discouraging humans from using the platform. The "Not a Bot" subscription service is only a single bandage on a much wider wound. AI bot activity is still a prevalent issue on X, and many of those accounts continue to spread information and scam humans.

False information disguised as factual evidence is something not new to the internet. Seeing several accounts share similar thoughts and "facts" can lead people into thinking their words are an example of a common opinion or the truth. While the dead internet theory claims the spread of misinformation is the U.S government's doing, the truth is a much larger entity: humanity. Bots can be led by an individual with a specific objective, or by news outlets as a way to garner traffic to their website. Humans are the ones manipulating and misinforming other humans, and bots serve as a rapid method to accomplish their goals. There is a serious issue regarding how often online deceptions go unverified, which as a result, manipulates the truth of a situation.

However, despite anyone being capable of creating bots, many still point blame towards the U.S government. The recent ban on TikTok is enough evidence for many (McMahon). Many people believe that the U.S government is trying to control TikTok as a way to manage algorithms and censor content that is rebellious against governmental

officials and policies. However, there is no factual evidence that their motive for the ban is to censor Americans, only speculation. What draws so many to the intrigue of conspiracy theories is the uncertainty of the truth. Kathryn Olmsted, in her book, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, described a conspiracy theory as, “A proposal about a conspiracy that may or may not be true; it has not yet been proven.” (Olmsted 3). The chance of something being real levels itself out with the chances of being proven false. Answers are rarely found or accepted, and so, conspiracy theories continue to perpetuate on. As more AI bots continue to spread across the internet, their existence will become more prevalent. Thus, the dead internet theory will only keep gaining believers.

The internet started as a milestone for human society. A virtual space where humans from across the world gather and discuss their favorite topics, share their artwork, or vent about their family troubles. A place where thousands of documents and videos exist to educate people on sciences or history. Just like how humans were born to create, the internet was born for the same reasons. Yet creations are quickly turning into artificially generated content. Subreddits like r/SubSimulatorGPT2 prove that bots can communicate with each other seamlessly. Dangerous uses of AI are also finding its way outside of the confines of the internet and into real-world situations. A student can write their essay in ChatGPT, an artist can generate a portrait of themselves with DALL-E 3. Deepfakes can alter a person's face into a body that's not theirs, and AI speech generators can make a person say something outside their vocabulary. One YouTuber, “Kwebbelkop,” has used all these aspects of AI to create gaming YouTube videos (Sliwinski). His videos have amassed over seven billion views, fooling many

viewers into believing the face and voice featured in his video is authentic. With AI plaguing the internet and pushing human presence into the minority, the day the internet dies might be closer to the present than it is to the future.

The dead internet theory serves as a cautionary look towards the future. The conspiracy theory raises awareness to the dangers of artificially generated content. Even if the exact philosophies that define the dead internet theory are either untrue or unverifiable, manipulation and misinformation are issues that pose a severe threat. AI acts as a quick and effortless way to obtain a finished product. While AI generation may not be perfect, it's passable. And for many, that's all that's needed. What humans need to realize is their potential to create and produce original content. Even if mistakes are made in the process, it's what makes a creation authentic. As long as humanity isn't afraid to experiment and utilize their skills, then both the internet and humanity will fight for its survival.

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