

Marta Ceccarelli

Internet's Dark Forests:

Subcultural Memories and Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary



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and Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary

Somewhere along the journey of my online life, I found myself in a Dark Forest. Deviating from my one path for the internet, I entered a foggy shadowland. Looking back at it is not easy, but to treat the good I found there, I must recount the entirety of it. Truthfully, I do not know exactly what led me down the path of Dark Forests. At first, it did not look like a path at all, it was only later that the nebulous online activity I was engaging in revealed itself to be patterned. Only once I had reached my destination, I realised it wasn't a place at all.

#### I. THE INTERNET DOESN'T EXIST ...

What exists are rather internet imaginaries, mental pictures of hardware+software assemblages, the internet being a technological object as much as it is an economic, social, cultural one. We need language to concretise this ephemeral and complex non-thing, so we immortalise those images through linguistic devices such as metaphors. It is no arbitrary process – it is instead revelatory of internet histories and shared cultural meanings. The Dark Forest metaphor is one of such instances.

Dark Forests can be described as sheltered digital spaces which structurally and discursively foster community formation, allow for experimentations in self-presentation and propose alternative imaginaries to the mainstream internet of platforms. The term was popularised by an online subculture by the same name, which originated roughly in

2019, a scene connected to the movement of post-internet art, alternative critical media production and meme culture. If we indulge in the metaphor of the Dark Forest this scene proposes, the internet appears as a layered ecosystem. At the top, there is the vast sky of the Clearnet, controlled by and organised around the larger corporations. This is the web of search engines and platforms, the layer where most users remain for their whole journey throughout the internet. Metres below ground sits the parallel network of the Dark Net, protected by encrypted access and mainly associated with sites for illegal activities. Nestled in-between, hiding in plain sight, the Dark Forest system sprawls.

When trying to escape the increasingly controlled platform ecosystem, Dark Forests offer temporary places of refuge for the tired internet traveller. Dark Forests promise to be a space for forgiving communication, crafting alternatives to the Clearnet's data extracting practices, algorithmic moderation and peer scrutiny. Casting long shadows over few, yet fertile corners of the web, Dark Forests make themselves visible to some. Accessible through continued interaction and decoding of subcultural dialects, Dark Forests are reachable just to the ones who follow the breadcrumbs. In an attempt to conceal their traces and remain in the shadows, the inhabitants of these spaces enrich seemingly empty symbols and create covert forms of communication. The Dark Forest system appears silent or incomprehensible from afar. But once you're in, there is nothing but noise.

The Dark Forest is only a metaphor, a way to imagine specific websites, platforms and content streams, as well

as the subcultures which they produce. Not technologically different from the rest of the web, the Dark Forest metaphor concretises an otherwise vague digital culture phenomenon into an image. The metaphor serves two purposes. The first is a theoretical one, suggesting the existence of a mainstream web, the Clearnet, and a sheltered alternative space, the Dark Forest. As a critique of the current state of the internet, the theory indicates that digital places can reappropriate and oppose the contemporary organisation of the web. If the Clearnet projects a blinding light over anything it touches, the Dark Forest attempts to counter that visibility by creating shadowlands, while the Dark Net remains untouched by remaining fully underground. The second purpose is a practical one, a name for the actual communities which inhabit alternative digital spaces, the subcultural practices they employ to communicate, craft alternative collective identities and occupy digital space.

The metaphor of the Dark Forest is borrowed from the second book of *The Remembrance of the Earth's Past* trilogy by Liu Cixin. In the sci-fi novel, the theory is applied to the universe to give a possible explanation for the Fermi paradox, which addresses how, despite high estimation of it, there is no clear evidence of extraterrestrial life. The universe's silence is not due to an absence of alien life but rather because of the inherent dangers of communication. Revealing one's existence and position to an alien civilisation would call for conflict and mutual destruction, with a war inevitably being waged due to limited cosmic resources. The metaphor references the silence of a forest at night. Despite its quietness, the forest is full of life. Nocturnal animals inhabiting this ecosystem are aware of how,

especially in the dark, sounds can be registered and used by predators to locate them. Silence in a dark forest, and in Liu Cixin's universe, is a tactic or survival.

#### The Internet's Dark Forests

What follows is an experiential, intimate and loosely academic navigation of the Dark Forest space. This is an invitation to join me in this speculative journey through theory and practice, and to collectively reflect on how Dark Forests construct an alternative internet imaginary. This text has itself gone through a journey of reinvention. My interest in this space stemmed from personal experiences within the subculture. I began my research, somewhat unconsciously, in 2020, which then culminated in a master's thesis in 2022. The text evolved as a publication for the Institute of Networked Cultures' *Network Notion* series published in 2024, titled *Internet's Dark Forests: Subcultural Memories and Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary*.

At the speed at which internet phenomena travel, it might seem somewhat late to discuss events that happened almost five years ago. Yet, the grievances articulated by Dark Forests are relevant now more than ever. The concerns raised by the margins of the internet have only grown more pressing, as the increasingly hegemonic Clearnet has maintained and consolidated its power through tumultuous political processes. Many of the fears that once unsettled the fringes of the digital world – fears about the ever-expanding platformisation of society and the hegemonic transformation of technology – have breached the mainstream. More visible than it has ever been before, the entanglement of power and technology has become more complex and perverted.

The GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) stack struggles to straddle volatile markets, navigating threats of bans, promises of governmental deregulation, competition from Chinese firms. The promises of a decentralised Web 3 seem already obsolete and kitsch, AI threatens or promises – depending on who you ask – to completely uphaul our lives. Alternative Web 2 social media platforms emerge and die quickly, each potential exit path too perilous, complex or banal to be taken seriously. Maybe today more than ever, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Clearnet.

But Dark Forests haven't given up either. On a granular level, much has changed since the time of my research in terms of the relevance and aliveness of the subcultures I studied. Some have gradually exited the darker corners of the web, seeking spaces that feel less isolated. Others have remained underground; many have disappeared entirely. The Dark Forest space transformed, stretched, retrieved, reflecting the dynamic and ephemeral nature of digital subcultures. What is certain is that the ideas proposed within that scene have not left, as they have continued to travel, connect and evolve like the communities they stemmed from.

Most notably, *The Dark Forest Anthology* was co-released on Metalabel by the Dark Forest Collective in 2023. The anthology is a product of members and leaders of Dark Forest communities (including New Models, Do Not Research, Trust, Ribbonfarm, The Stoa and Metalabel), online spaces that exemplified new possibilities for digital social institutions. The pieces were documenting the experience of being in the middle of a key evolutionary moment in

the social life of the internet, from a perceived “youthful exuberance and naiveté” to “anxiety, self-protection, and a thirst for social structures that could provide safety, meaning, and context in a newly adversarial realm”.<sup>1</sup> The collection reflects that transitory moment, with the aim of capturing the essence of those five years: “Here’s what we felt. Here’s what we were afraid of. Here’s how we tried to collectively and individually self-manage a social revolution churning all around us.”<sup>2</sup>

The Anthology began unknowingly in May 2019 when Yancey Strickler wrote a piece titled *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet*. The essay connected the author’s struggle to be authentic online with an increasing sense of threat and danger on the internet. It used the metaphor of the Dark Forest introduced in Fermi’s Paradox and by Chinese sci-fi author Cixin Liu in his *Three-Body Problem* trilogy. As the essay spread, other writers began to engage with and build on its ideas. Contributors like Venkatesh Rao, Maggie Appleton, Peter Limberg, Rebecca Fox, Leith Benkhadda, Joshua Citarella, Arthur Röing Baer, GVN908, Caroline Busta and Julian Wadsworth expanded on the concept. Their pieces explore the internet not as a single place, but as a whole topography comprised of multiple levels of safety and security. They delved into practices of online homesteading, the potential for communities to serve as models for new institutions, and what the future(s) of media might look like. Together, they capture the emotional experience of being online during this transformative period.

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1 The Dark Forest Collective. (2024). *The Dark Forest Anthology of the Internet*. The Dark Forest Collective, p. 10.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Many of the 11 pieces gathered in *The Dark Forest Anthology* were the ones that had guided me through my journey into the Dark Forest space. At the time of publishing, they also served as source material for my research. These writings were part of the cultural milieu I inhabited, created by the leaders and members of the communities I was part of or aspired to join. While the *Anthology* successfully gathers some of the most fundamental writing from that time, my approach here is slightly different. Having experienced and observed Dark Forests from the margins rather than from its active core, this text expands on the picture they paint by offering two unique perspectives that felt somewhat absent from the *Anthology*. First, given my academic background, I structure my exploration of Dark Forests around critical media theory and digital culture analysis, formalising their internet critique. Second, I see Dark Forests as extending beyond that original core. In particular, I consider the meme sphere a fundamental aspect of the cultural scene surrounding Dark Forests. My vantage point from the margins allows me to outline the internet ideologies and histories underpinning the subculture and to identify where theory bleeds into practice. I approach Dark Forests as more than a proposed imaginary or set of practices. Instead, I analyse it as a subculture – a scene with a (digital) territory, giving it a temporal dimension. I examine its aesthetic and vernacular practices, exploring how these elements shape and reflect its identity. By doing so, I hope to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of Dark Forests, one that complements and expands upon the foundational work of the *Anthology*.



### What Are Dark Forests Anyway

The authors of the essays collected in the *Dark Forest Anthology* represent some of the most influential figures in popularising the term and fostering the development of theories and practices formative of this imaginary. This was due to the active communities which had formed around these figures around the time of publishing of the original articles. An example is New Models, which launched in 2018 as a content aggregator for information regarding Web 2 and its impact on the art, music and publishing industry. The New Models podcast fostered an active community of listeners, facilitated by their Patreon and private Discord server. These sheltered spaces allowed for collaboration and production of theory, media and events related to the Dark Forest and Clearnet dynamics, playing a substantial role in the development of the Dark Forest theory.

Some Dark Forests have defined themselves, on different occasions, through different forms of publications. The *Anthology* self-define themselves as: “Online gathering spaces that are non-indexed, non-optimised, non-gamified, and hidden from public view. Typically hosted in Discords, Telegram, WhatsApp Groups, and other private channels where conversations feel private and contextually safe.”<sup>3</sup> Conversely, they define the Clearnet as “All publicly indexed sites (i.e., big social media, commercial platforms, and anything crawled by major search engines).”<sup>4</sup>

Venkatesh Rao, writer of the Ribbonfarm blog, followed up on Strickler’s essay by introducing the concept of the *CozyWeb*, which he describes as a homesteading-like

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3 Ibid., p. 197.

4 Ibid., p. 194.

approach to online interaction. Unlike the public internet, where users navigate links on pages maintained by publishers, the CozyWeb relies on people manually sharing content such as text, images, URLs and screenshots within private or semi-private spaces.<sup>5</sup> This content is often difficult to search, poorly indexed and prone to disappearing over time. It exists in gated, informal networks that include messaging apps, private groups, services like Dropbox, and email.

Similarly, the WebDex Y2K20 glossary published by New Models Discord users defined Dark Forest Internet as decentralised digital spaces operating in contrast to the Clearnet's indexed, public-facing nature that's susceptible to surveillance and deplatforming.<sup>6</sup> Dark Forests can come in the form of Discord servers, paid newsletters, encrypted group messaging, gaming communities, podcasts and other message board forums.<sup>7</sup> These spaces are often created because of shared niche interests, and over time develop in-group cultures and organisational structures. Eliminating possible exposure to algorithmic moderation, employers or IRL peers, these spaces are chosen because they are less sociologically stressful than the Clearnet, promoting depressurised forms of conversation.<sup>8</sup>

For Strickler, Dark Forests appeared as a response to “the ads, the tracking, the trolling, the hype, and other

- 5 Rao, V. (2020, July 21). *The Extended Internet Universe*. Ribbonfarm. Retrieved January 28, 2025, from <https://contraptions.venkateshrao.com/p/the-extended-internet-universe>
- 6 NM WEBDEX. (n. d.). NM WEBDEX. Retrieved June 5, 2022, from <https://webdex-y2k20.newmodels.io>
- 7 Busta, C. (2021, January 14). The Internet Didn't Kill Counterculture – You Just Won't Find It on Instagram. *Document Journal*. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from <https://www.documentjournal.com/2021/01/the-internet-didnt-kill-counterculture-you-just-wont-find-it-on-instagram/>
- 8 Strickler, Y. (2019, June 5). The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet. *Medium*. <https://onezero.medium.com/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet-7dc3e68a7cb1>

predatory behaviours” of the mainstream web.<sup>9</sup> The internet, which was supposed to foster knowledge production, community building and identity formation, came under threat with its commercialisation. Consequently, there was a move towards alternative digital spaces, leading to the emergence of Dark Forests. Strickler calls this the *Web<sup>2</sup> era*, where users simultaneously inhabit many different internets. Dark Forests are a continuation of early web hacker culture, which saw the web as a public common being threatened by its privatisation. Their values of freedom and anonymity persisted beyond hacking communities in websites such as Reddit and 4chan. Nestled between the light of search engines and the shadow of their communication and community practices, existing “at the fringes of an increasingly hegemonic platform economy”,<sup>10</sup> these spaces are in some ways the original Dark Forests of the internet.

Another relevant contribution, if somewhat detached from the core of the scene, is an article by Art and media scholar Bogna Konior, who more closely addresses elements of Liu Cixin’s original metaphor in a 2020 essay published for *Flugschriften*. Konior observes that the pressure to communicate clearly and signal trustworthiness leads to exchanges that aim for maximum clarity yet require endless disclaimers to avoid misinterpretation.<sup>11</sup> While users hope that transparency and contextualisation

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9 Ibid.

10 Zeeuw, D. de, & Tuters, M. (2020). The Internet Is Serious Business: On the Deep Vernacular Web and Its Discontents. *Cultural Politics*, 16(2), pp. 214–232. <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-8233406>

11 Konior, B. (2020, July 6). The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet. *BLOK Magazine*, p. 17. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from <http://blokmagazine.com/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet/>

will resolve conflicts, Konior warns that greater visibility often makes individuals more vulnerable.<sup>12</sup> The more one discloses, the easier it becomes to target or govern them. This paradox highlights the tension between the desire for connection and the risks of exposure, suggesting that the dynamics of online communication reflect deeper conflicts inherent to being online.

Rather than being anchored to specific URLs, Dark Forests are able to spawn wherever affordances allow for closer or more private interactions. Technically, then, Dark Forests are using the exact same cables and satellites as the Clearnet, accessing both versions of the internet through the same devices. Often, entry in these spaces is mediated by Clearnet platforms. The members of Dark Forest communities continue to participate in Clearnet spaces. It is not a binary choice but rather a complementary way of being online. While highly informative of different media practices, the Clearnet/Dark Forest remains a conceptual and permeable boundary, a divide different from the technical one between the indexed web and the Dark Net, for example.

The communities from this digital scene can be of different sizes and scopes, varying in levels of intended visibility and reach, from niche and private group chats to publicly promoted servers. There's no map to this space; it is ever changing and fluid. Its dwellers are not anchored to one specific place. Awareness of other communities might vary, but different Forests often overlap. Communities also span interests, ranging from gaming and music to politics, art and digital culture. Given their

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12 Ibid.

sheltered and fluid nature, it is impossible to give a precise map of all the specific communities operating within the Dark Forest system.



Layered Internet, n. d.  
Digital image. Stolbun Institute. Retrieved June 7, 2022.

Dark Forests are not composed of discrete audiences, but leaky ones. The dynamics of these worlds contribute to a “murky, viscous, zero-gravity dreamscape”,<sup>13</sup> a sticky sub-cultural medium in which communities dynamically grow and exchange materials operating as an open ecosystem. Becoming “leaky and lossy”<sup>14</sup> like oral language, visual and textual forms dynamically seep through the layered web.

13 Marris, L., & Dingsun, T. (2022, February 28). *The Lore Zone: How to Read the Internet*. Other Internet. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from <https://otherinternet/research/lore/how-to-read-the-internet/>

14 NM WEBDEX, n. d.

For the writers of the NM WebDex, this form of vernacular acts as “soft-resistance against processes of systematisation and over-determination” of the Clearnet, since selective obfuscation allows meaning to take more sheltered pathways.<sup>15</sup> The type of vernacular or internet dialect is *lore*, a form of collective memory and self-mythologisation which independent researchers Tiger Dingsun and Libby Marrs see as bringing cohesion to digital communities.<sup>16</sup>

The Dark Forest descriptor is loose enough to be applied to many communities spanning niches and locations across the web. Dark Forests are inherently plural, not one but many different intersecting patches of the internet, proximal yet distinct. Not all digital communities which could be seen as Dark Forests call themselves as such. Some are less directly engaged with the creation of knowledge regarding digital culture and therefore less interested in any form of labelling. Yet, the term remains relevant and useful for researchers to operationalise and analyse a series of digital spaces and practices regardless of whether self-identification occurs or not.

## II. A PARTIAL HISTORY OF THE INTERNET

Given the multiplicity of meanings the internet can take, it might be misleading to even speak of *the* internet as a single object, raising a fundamental question: “Can we write Internet histories if we do not know what the Internet is?”<sup>17</sup> Owing to its vast and undefined nature, any analytical

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15 Ibid.

16 Marrs & Dingsun, 2022.

17 Abbate, J. (2017). What and Where Is the Internet? (Re)defining Internet Histories. *Internet Histories*, 1(1–2), pp. 8–14. Retrieved February 18, 2025, from <https://www.tandfonline-com.proxy.uba.uva.nl/doi/abs/10.1080/24701475.2017.1305836>

frame used to describe the internet will always be partial and flawed. Yet, there is a tangible cultural reality in seeing this complex and prismatic object as one distinct global system.<sup>18</sup> While there is no one path for the internet, there are multiple, entangled points of entries from which manifold maps can be drawn. Trying to periodise the internet does not mean devising definite, subsequent and strict temporal categories. Epistemologically distinctive eras might actually temporally overlap, and the same key moments could be interpreted in different ways.<sup>19</sup> The periodisation is itself temporary and with the potential to be rewritten.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, my approach to internet history is a possible interpretation of events.

#### From Counterculture to Cyberculture to Platform Culture

The ideological foundations behind the internet as a tool for profit making begin in an unlikely place, the 1960s Californian countercultural movements. In his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner argues that throughout the 1960s, computers were seen as technologies of dehumanisation, centralised bureaucracy and rationalisation of social life.<sup>21</sup> The countercultural movement helped transform this view into the belief that ubiquitous computing was the ideal technological tool for a decentralised, egalitarian, harmonious and free society. Stewart Brand and the network of San Francisco Bay Area entrepreneurs brought together by his magazine, the *Whole Earth*

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18 Ibid., p. 13.

19 Periodizing Web Archiving: Biographical, Event-Based, National and Autobiographical. (2018). In *The SAGE Handbook of Web History* (pp. 42–56). SAGE.

20 Periodizing Web Archiving, 2018, p. 43.

21 Turner, F. (2010). *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

*Catalog*, were especially influential in this process. Dale Beran notes that Brand's popular slogan "We are as gods" resonated with desires to transform consciousness through technology, seeing computers as the new acid which could awaken people and transform their ways of thinking and interacting with one another.<sup>22</sup>

Brand's network brought together members of countercultural communes with the emerging technological hub of Silicon Valley. As this union and the network that *Whole Earth* was building became more established, computing and the developing technology of the internet also became the symbols of a new economic era. In a seemingly contradictory manner, counterculture embraced the forces of capital, technology and the state, as the internet especially began to be seen as a tool to build new businesses and reject traditional forms of government.<sup>23</sup> By the mid-1980s, Brand had transformed from a countercultural homesteader into a businessman, just like "yuppies turned into yuppies", a generation inescapably engulfed by consumerism.<sup>24</sup> The seemingly incongruous union – which with time has revealed itself to be not incongruous at all – is what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron call the *Californian ideology*, an ideology for which right-wing neo-liberalism, counterculture radicalism and technological determinism collide.<sup>25</sup> Neoliberal in its narratives of empowerment of the individual and enhancement of personal freedom through technologies, the Californian

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22 Beran, D. (2019). *It Came from Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office*. St. Martin's Publishing Group, p. 36.

23 Turner, 2010, p. 8.

24 Beran, 2019, p. 36.

25 Barbrook, R., & Cameron, A. (1996). The Californian Ideology. *Science as Culture*, 6(1), pp. 44–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505439609526455>



The be continued...

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# WFM DPS

Online is not a place we go: it is a place we cannot leave. In an increasingly hegemonic internet ecosystem, where do we find temporary spaces for refuge? The answer to this growing need to escape the Clearnet might be Dark Forests. These sheltered digital spaces structurally and discursively foster community formation, allow for experimentations in self-presentation, and propose alternative imaginaries to the mainstream internet of platforms. Casting long shadows over a handful of fertile corners of the web, Dark Forests make themselves visible only to some. The Dark Forest system seems silent or incomprehensible from afar. But once you're in, there is nothing but noise.

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