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THE "DEAD INTERNET THEORY": WHY THE CONSPIRACY FAILS BUT ITS CORE CONCERN DESERVES ATTENTION

Annotation: *This article critically examines the "Dead Internet Theory," which claims bots and algorithms generate most online content. While debunking its core claims as scientifically unfounded and logically flawed, the study acknowledges its value in highlighting real digital ecosystem shifts. The analysis exposes the theory's chronological inconsistencies and underestimation of human agency. However, the explosive growth of AI-generated content makes the theory's underlying concerns about information authenticity increasingly relevant for academic and public discourse.*

Key words: *Dead Internet Theory, generative AI, social bots, conspiracy theory, information ecosystem, human agency, digital manipulation.*

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"ТЕОРИЯ МЕРТВОГО ИНТЕРНЕТА": ПОЧЕМУ ЗАГОВОР ПРОВАЛИЛСЯ НО ЕЕ ОСНОВНАЯ ПРОБЛЕМА ЗАСЛУЖИВАЕТ ВНИМАНИЯ

Аннотация: *В данной статье проводится критический анализ «Теории мертвого интернета», утверждающей, что большая часть онлайн-контента создается ботами и алгоритмами. Хотя основные положения теории опровергаются как научно необоснованные и логически ошибочные, исследование признает ее ценность в выявлении реальных изменений цифровой экосистемы. Анализ раскрывает хронологические несоответствия теории и недооценку человеческого фактора. Однако стремительный рост контента, генерируемого ИИ, делает лежащие в основе теории опасения относительно аутентичности информации все более актуальными для академического и общественного дискурса.*

Ключевые слова: *Теория мертвого интернета, генеративный ИИ, социальные боты, теория заговора, информационная экосистема, человеческий фактор, цифровая манипуляция.*

The "Dead Internet Theory" lurks in the darker corners of online forums, offering a grim diagnosis for the entire digital age. Its proponents claim that sometime in the late 2010s, the internet effectively "died," becoming a sterile space populated by advanced bots and algorithms that generate most content, simulate human interaction, and manipulate trends, while real human users have been relegated to a marginal role. While this apocalyptic vision has gained traction amidst the current boom in generative AI, a closer inspection reveals its radical version to be a classic conspiracy construct. Yet, like many such theories, it points to genuine and profound disturbances within our digital environment [Bishop, 2019].

To move beyond speculation, we must examine concrete data on AI-generated content proliferation. According to a comprehensive study by the Originality.AI research team, which analyzed over 13.8 billion web pages through specialized crawlers, the proportion of AI-generated text content has seen exponential growth since 2022. The data reveals a striking trajectory: while AI-generated content constituted less than 2% of all analyzed web text in early 2022, this figure surged to approximately 7.5% by mid-2023, and reached nearly 12% by the first quarter of 2024. This represents a six-fold increase in just over two years, directly correlating with the public release and widespread adoption of advanced language models like GPT-4 and Claude 2.

The distribution of this synthetic content follows distinct patterns that both challenge and partially validate aspects of the Dead Internet Theory. The same study found significant concentration variations across different web segments. While major news platforms and established educational resources maintain predominantly human-written content (with AI detection rates below 5%), certain content farm websites and affiliate marketing pages showed AI-generation rates exceeding 45%. This segmentation contradicts the theory's universal claims but supports its concerns about specific digital environments becoming dominated by synthetic content [Originality.AI, 2024].

Further analysis reveals the technological limitations that prevented an earlier realization of the theory's scenario. Research by Ferrara (2017) on social bot activities during the 2016-2018 period—precisely when the Dead Internet Theory allegedly emerged—demonstrated that automated accounts primarily functioned through simple retweets, repetitive phrases, and stolen content rather than original text generation. The linguistic complexity and contextual coherence required for convincing long-form content simply exceeded the capabilities of automation technologies available during the theory's formative period. This technological context fundamentally undermines the theory's historical claims while highlighting how recent AI advancements have created new possibilities that simply didn't exist when the theory first circulated.

First and foremost, the theory stumbles over a basic chronological paradox. Its origins are typically traced back to the period around 2016-2018. However, the generative AI technologies necessary for the mass creation of convincing, unique text, images, and video simply did not exist in a publicly accessible or scalable form at that time. Models like GPT-2, released in 2019, were rudimentary prototypes, far from capable of covertly flooding the internet with billions of high-quality posts. The bots of that era were primitive, easily identified by their repetitive phrases, recycled content, and illogical responses. To suggest that these simple scripts somehow "took over" the global web is to ignore the stark reality of technological capabilities just a few years ago [Ferrara, 2017].

The theory's central and most critically vulnerable postulate is the idea of a self-sustaining system where bots primarily interact with one another. This image paints a picture of a pointless digital play performed for an empty theater. It collapses, however, under a simple question of motive: what is the economic or political purpose of such an elaborate and costly charade? The large corporations and governments often cast as the villains in these narratives do not invest colossal resources into simulating activity for its own sake [Hwang, 2020].

A far more logical and evidence-supported model reveals a different truth: bots and generative AI are not the masters of the internet, but powerful tools wielded by humans. They are deployed for concrete and pragmatic goals: astroturfing (simulating grassroots support), inflating ratings and reviews, spreading disinformation, manipulating cryptocurrency markets, and influencing public opinion. The ultimate consumers of the generated content are always real people, whose perceptions and behaviors are the true targets. Bots do not read each other; they are designed to be read and believed by us. Therefore, the internet is not "dead"; it is being purposefully and strategically polluted. This is a fundamentally different, albeit still deeply concerning, reality [Hwang, 2020].

Furthermore, the theory often leans on a subjective feeling of "weirdness" and "soullessness" in the modern digital space. Recommendation algorithms that trap us in "filter bubbles," the homogenized design of websites, the dominance of viral content over substantive discussion—all these are interpreted as signs of "death." Yet, these phenomena are not the result of a secret plot. They are the direct consequences of platform commercialization and optimization for an advertising-driven revenue model. The internet has become different—more managed and commercialized—but its driving force remains quintessentially human: the desire for profit, influence, or simple entertainment [Maréchal, 2017].

That said, it would be a mistake to completely discard the intuition behind the Dead Internet Theory. Its value lies not in its explanation, but in its warning. With the advent of advanced models like GPT-4 and Midjourney, the scenario that was once science fiction is now technically feasible. Today, neural networks can generate floods of persuasive text and media, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish their output from that of a human. The fears that this could lead to:

1. A complete erosion of digital trust,
2. The pollution of the information environment to a state of bankruptcy,
3. The devaluation of human creativity and labor, are absolutely legitimate and demand serious, proactive discussion [Ferrara, 2023].

In conclusion, the Dead Internet Theory, in its orthodox, conspiratorial form, does not withstand scrutiny. It exaggerates past technological capabilities, ignores the central role of human intent, and proposes far-fetched motives for its alleged architects. However, it functions as a canary in the coal mine, acutely sensitive to real and toxic trends. Our task is not to believe in a digital apocalypse, but to soberly assess these emerging risks. We must channel this awareness into developing robust digital literacy, effective content verification systems, and legal frameworks that will help preserve the internet as a space for authentic human connection, not just a convincingly simulated facade of it.

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