W2: Lurking

What We Do In The Shadows: Lurking and Social Media

Reading assignments: Joanne McNeill, *Lurking*: Ch. 2, "Anonymity," Ch. 4, "Sharing" (see GitHub for download)

References

Stacy Horn, *Cyberville: Clicks, Culture, and the Creation of an Online Town* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998).

Julian Dibbell, A Rape in Cyberspace. Original publication: *The Village Voice*, December 1993. Subsequently published in *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998), chapter 1.

Ana Voog, "I Was One of the Most Famous People Online in 1998 — Then I Disappeared," *Vice*, 22 June 2018.

Nicole Carpenter, The Gentle Side of Twitch," *Gizmodo*, 23 April 2019.

Mendi + Keith Obadike

Why's Poignant Guide to Ruby

What is Usenet? Complete Guide to Usenet & How to Use It in 2022

Jonathan Crary, "The Digital Age is Destroying Us," *Literary Hub*, 18 April 2022.

> The internet democratized being a nobody.—Joanne McNeill

You've (probably) heard of LARPing. But have you heard of lurking? Like that other obsolete 1990s term, **cyberspace**, the term **lurking** seems to have fallen into disuse these days, even though as a practice it's still very much around. I don't mind admitting, though, that I more or less decided to assign Joanne McNeill's recent book *Lurking* almost on the strength of its title alone, because that one word alone told me everything I needed to know about its content. As it happens, Joanne and I belong to almost the same internet generation—the one that discovered the internet (then spelt with an upper-case 'I,' as was

the usage then) and the web (then known by the quaintly adorable "World Wide Web," still reproduced in the www of URL addresses) in the early 1990s, through *WIRED* magazine and *Mondo 2000*, when we were talking about **cyberspace** and what Howard Rheingold had named **virtual communities**, when the term **browser** was new. Before Chrome, Safari, and Firefox, I remember using Mosaic and Netscape. I began coding websites for my courses in raw HTML, before Javascript and CSS existed. While they look hokey by today's standards, some of those websites are still around a quarter of a century later; I wonder how many of today's Javascript-based Wordpress blogs will still be accessible twenty five years from now in 2047.

These were the days of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) and 12-baud dialup connections. We used Gopher for search, a text-based browser called Lynx (get it?), and telnet to remote-login to servers. We would hang out in "text-based virtual reality systems" called "MUDs" (an acronym for Multi-User Dungeons or Dimensions, a kind of online counterpart to Dungeons & Dragons board game), or more socially oriented MOOs (MUD, Object-Oriented—an acronym containing an acronym). I'm familiar with most of the references that McNeill discusses in her second chapter ("Anonymity"), from Stacy Horn's ECHO community to the article by Julian Dibbell, the first—but certainly not the last—account of online sexual harrasment. I read Dibbell's article when it was published in the *Village Voice*, and invited him to participate in a forum I organized called "Democracy in Cyberspace" (I'm planning to put the transcript back up online soon, if possible before the end of the course).

I decided to assign *Lurking* because for all you millennials and Gen-Zers too young to remember it, I wanted you to read about the history of social media **before** social media (at least in chapter 2; as you'll have seen, chapter 4 covers the more recent and more familiar territory of the iPhone, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr)—to give you an idea of what internet culture looked like in the 1990s, and how it anticipated in many ways the social media world of today. In fact, a surprising amount of that culture has persisted right up to the present, even though it's been completely eclipsed by the rise of mobile-based social media platforms over the past fifteen years. There continues to be, for example, a thriving community around the text-based Gopher protocol; there's even an iOS Gopher app. So-called "modern" browsers like Chrome don't support it, although you can get extensions enabling you to access it.

Lurking, of course, has also not gone away. Entering the same question that ECHO asked its readers several decades ago, "Why do you lurk?" shows that lurking is by no means an obsolete practice dating back to UseNet newsgroups and CompuServe chat rooms: the Reddit Twitch group discusses it, for example, while the question is discussed in relation to many other platforms—try typing the question into Google and you'll see what I mean. Yet at the same time, the contemporary meaning of lurking itself seems to have changed: asking the question "Why do you lurk?" today seems almost confrontational, as if it's something that you're not supposed to be doing: in a networked media environment in which participation and "sharing" have become a social obligation, lurking seems an object of suspicion. After all, in a communication environment in which the business model of SM platforms is based on advertising, this **requires** that users (another term that McNeill puts under the microscope in the book's introduction) identify themselves so that their

demographic can be more efficiently targeted. From that standpoint, lurkers are simply refusing to play the game. So the question that this is leading up to—if you haven't already guessed!—is very simple: what's your own position on lurking? Are **you** a lurker? Where and why do **you** lurk? (Of course, only share what you're comfortable with!) Is lurking a legitimate form of engagement on social media platforms, or should it be banned (i.e. access to content is conditional on posting oneself)? Why has lurking, or admitting to lurking, become almost a form of social stigma in a world where public self-disclosure is expected as a form of responsible citizenship?

As for McNeill's "Sharing" chapter, I wonder what people make of a couple of her points. The first is about the snobbery of cultural critics in their hostility to "the internet," even while actually knowing very little about it: as she notes, "A cliché marker of writerly genius in magazine profiles at the time was that the 'author doesn't carry a phone' or 'doesn't use the internet." ' For a recent example of this kind of critique, see [this excerpt](The Digital Age is Destroying Us ‹ Literary Hub from the cultural theorist Jonathan Crary's recent book *Scorched Earth*.

A second question is in connection with McNeill's anecdote about Winona Ryder saying to Jimmy Fallon in 2011 that she was terrified of Google, which illustrates "how hard it is to feel in control as a user." Do you too get that sense of a loss of control in your experience of social media? What forms does this loss of control take today? What can be done about it?

All of which brings us, finally, to Twitter. Leaving aside the obsessive focus on the platform on Musk himself and the series of desperate and distastrous policy decisions since he acquired the platform, we may currently find ourselves in the privileged position of observing in real time the implosion and collapse of a social media platform, a once-in-a-lifetime event akin to witnessing a supernova or a passing comet. But the apparently imminent demise of Twitter, evidenced by the overnight halving of its workforce and the exodus from the platform to the open-source platforms of the fediverse, might prove to be the first in a series of such events. A couple of days ago, the internet researcher Zizi Papacharisi tweeted:

> Here's a thought.
>
> Platforms are over.

One thing that's clear from the past three decades, as Friendster and MySpace exemplify, is that social media platforms have a limited lifecycle. After Twitter, when can we expect the implosion of Facebook/Meta? And how long before TikTok burns itself into a white dwarf? Are the days of the social media platform itself numbered, as Papacharisi suggests?

As the red giants of the social media firmament seem to be on the brink of burning themselves out, the 90s-era internet continues very much as it has done for the past quarter century and longer. Other than the Gopher holdouts (one of whom is a friend of mine), there's a revival of interest in decentralized, open-source, free (as in beer) software, decades-old communication systems like Internet Relay Chat, and communities emerging around protocols completely outside the web, like Gemini. To get a sense of what's out there in terms of these alternative communities, both old and relatively new, take a look at the SDF Public Access UNIX

System (aka PubNIX) community, which I'm a member of), or the decentralized, rapidly-expanding constellation known as the fediverse.