

The social Internet is compromised.

poopshidder

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1 Eglin

In 2013, Reddit administrators shared a [blog post](#) documenting the most Reddit-addicted cities. Under the section ‘Most addicted city (over 100k visits total)’, three locations are listed, only one being a city. First is Eglin Air Force Base, with a population of about 2,700 according to the 2010 census. Next is Oak Brook, Illinois, which at the same time had a population of around 7,800. Last is South St. Paul, Minnesota, with a population of about 2,100.

Numerous social media posts (including on Reddit) identified these strange numbers as evidence of a conspiracy. After all, Eglin has hosted various cyberspace divisions over the years. Might any of these divisions be involved in psychological operations (psyops) to sway public opinion online?

Whenever this incident is discussed, people repeat the claim that the post was taken down or edited very quickly, and is now available only on the Internet Archive. To my knowledge the latter point is true, but the former is questionable: the earliest Internet Archive backup of the post I can find is from 2014, so deletion can’t have been all that urgent.

In any case, there are other plausible explanations for the page’s disappearance. Maybe no one bothered to save the page when admins migrated the blog to a new domain. Maybe they found the vague writing unbecoming¹. As for the numbers themselves, it’s possible the U.S. military has a VPN endpoint at Eglin. Or maybe Eglin, South St. Paul, and Oak Brook are such exceptionally boring places that the residents really do spend all their free time on Reddit².

While the Eglin conspiracy theory might not hold water, the fishy smell connects to a real and important issue. The architecture of the modern social Internet leaves us uniquely vulnerable to psyops of fake consensus. With the slow death of the Internet forum, and the dwindling popularity of (& technical barriers of entry to) IRC chats, Usenet systems, and personal websites, a handful of for-profit walled gardens have swallowed up most of our social interactions online. We place increasing trust in a handful of mediators, interacting on their terms and their turf.

¹The writing is, like, apocalyptically bad. Weird definition of a city aside, does ‘over 100k visits total’ mean unique visitors, or page views? If it’s page views, how does any major city not blow this number out of the water?

²Poor souls.

2 Astroturf

‘Astroturfing’ is a marketing term for ‘fake grassroots’: making calculated operations look like movements ‘by the people’. It’s a widespread phenomenon, applied to anything from viral marketing to politics. It can take the form of staged protests, op-eds, and even online comments sections.

And it *works*. Not always of course; we’ve all cringed at ‘how do you do, fellow kids?’-style viral marketing campaigns. But with enough content output and a little cleverness, the strategy can be effective. Whether we like it or not, our opinions are impacted by what we believe others find acceptable. So all you need to do is make an idea appear popular, even if only among a cult fanbase, and you can attract real followers.

The best example I know of successful astroturfing is the Tea Party movement, where a libertarian right coalition overtook America’s Republican Party in the late oughts and early 2010s. Investigative journalist Jane Mayer chronicles the takeover in her 2016 exposé *Dark Money*. A small group of wealthy conservatives led by the Koch brothers have been influencing American politics with donations to private foundations for decades³, and orchestrated some of the earliest Tea Party protests, talking points, and research.

Private foundations are ostensibly apolitical charities, but they’re easily corruptible. Just get together a bunch of donors, create a private foundation with a friendly name (e.g. Americans For Prosperity), and pay foundation employees to produce content supporting a predetermined conclusion. This is how oil companies have been able to fund so much research, books, documentaries, political ads, etc. suggesting that human-caused climate change is unproven, or actually good, or there’s nothing we can do about it, or whatever new defense.

Today, many everyday people hold libertarian right views. They spout ideas such as ‘taxation is theft’, ‘regulations stunt progress’, and ‘unions harm workers’. I’m not saying that everybody who believes these things got psyopped into it; I just think it’s important to understand that Libertarianism’s transition from a fringe ideology to the mainstream conservative platform was, at least in its nascent state, astroturfed.

Astroturfing predates the Internet, but now, particularly thanks to generative AI, it is easier and cheaper than ever to fake public consensus. Each and every one of us now has the power to convincingly simulate human writing with minimal effort. With a little elbow grease, anyone can make a bot army that is indistinguishable from a crowd of real people.

Recall the Facebook scandal with consulting firm Cambridge Analytica⁴, where the firm used users’ personal data to influence elections. Recall the es-

³Mayer makes clear that rich folks weaponize charitable donations all across the political spectrum. The Gates Foundation is one example. Mayer also wrote a piece on George Soros, a frequent donor to progressive causes and subject of conspiratorial scrutiny. However, the Kochs’ operation, whose network has been dubbed ‘the Kochtopus’, has been unusually secretive and willing to play dirty. Hiring private investigators to follow their critics, spreading easily debunkable accusations of plagiarism toward Mayer... These guys are into some serious stuff.

⁴Whose board once had Steve Bannon as its VP...

timates that a majority of X users are bots. Remember the *possibility* of an Eglin-like situation. We know disinformation farms exist. We know it's easier than ever to churn out slop. And we know that in all of these cases, major platforms are complicit at best, and active participants at worst.

The old slop-avoidance tactic of appending a web search with 'Reddit' can't sustain. Now that Reddit is viewed as a bastion of real human thought⁵, where do you think the manipulators of public opinion are going to focus their energy?

3 Escape

So obviously, phone bad, touch grass, read more books, yadda yadda yadda. You've heard it all before.

But many books, too, are corrupted by disinformation campaigns. However, I think by virtue of their length, books have the advantage of more opportunities to let their cracks show. Plus, once you own a book, it cannot be edited. I think that critically engaging with longform content is both more fun than doomscrolling, and better for you.

The Internet remains unmatched for instant access to information. There's a lot of valuable human-made stuff here. The Internet is not dead.

But I know I can't be so married to it. I am a little embarrassed how much of my vocabulary, political and otherwise, comes from memes. How deeply imbued into my routine scrolling a handful of platforms with nefarious interests has become. How warped my worldview is from daily interactions with tricksters and clankers.

Earlier I mentioned IRC chats, Usenet systems, and personal websites. I should clarify that none of these are pure channels for truth. I hear Usenet is full of spam these days. Bots can easily pass as humans in chat rooms. And anybody can put anything on a personal website.

The advantage, in my mind, is multiplicity. If one chatroom or Usenet server or website is trash, there are others. These communities aren't centralized — or at least don't have to be. So the incentives at play are more varied, the psyops more scattershot. I think that if we want a healthy Internet, we must be prepared to restlessly hop between platforms.

There is an irony to me using a centralized platform to share this. Neocities is owned and run by one guy, Kyle Drake. Neocities has the advantage of an existing, bustling human community. It's hard to balance community with decentralization.⁶ But at the end of the day, Neocities offers free static web hosting on a charming platform. At least it's not GitHub. Maybe I'll move this blog elsewhere eventually, but for now, here I have a page fully under my control, where I can share my thoughts in a longform fashion. I think that's a win. I hope more of my friends do the same. (Webrings, anyone?) It's fun to make a secret blog.

⁵However vile

⁶On the other hand, Mastodon seems to be doing fine. I don't know much about it.

One last thing. I think machine learning is pretty cool and there are some good tools out there. But I don't ask AI to write for me, and I think you may benefit from holding off on that as well. I type out my thoughts by hand because the work of writing is valuable to me. It helps me sort out what I believe, and communicating is a craft I want to hone. I want to produce work of substance, however cruddy, instead of smooth, business casual bullshit. You have a unique voice and unless you really don't care about writing, I'd love for you to share it. Let's keep the Internet alive.

Send comments to shidpooper@proton.me. If they're constructive and interesting I may post them below.