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On the Cultural Power of the “Marianas Web” Meme

NB: This is an early draft of a potential book chapter. Please contact me (robert.gehl@utah.edu) before citing for the latest version.

Introduction

2012 was a heady year for the Dark Web. The Silk Road drug market, hosted as a Tor hidden service, had been in the public eye for months since a 2011 *Gawker* article declared it like an “Amazon [that] sold mind-altering chemicals.”¹ Another anonymizing network, the Invisible Internet Project, was seeing increased traffic thanks to a mirror of The Pirate Bay. And the oldest Dark Web network, Freenet, participated in another Google Summer of Code, this time focusing on increasing social networking applications on that network.²

But perhaps the most important Dark Web event of 2012 was the anonymous publication of “Another Infographic of the Ocean” on the image sharing site Imgur.³ The infographic maps the “layers” of the Internet in great detail, using an iceberg to hammer home the often-repeated trope that the “surface” Internet that most of us see is only a tiny fraction of the Internet itself, with so much lying below the surface. Below the surface lies darkness – the Dark Web, hidden websites full of strange, dangerous, and powerful knowledge. But the graphic goes further: there are layers beyond the lowest depths of the iceberg, layers beyond even Tor hidden services or Freenet Freesites. There are 5 layers of the Internet, to be exact. And at the bottom, the most mysterious layer, layer 5, is the Marianas Web.

The infographic is a joke, specifically a troll, an attempt to see who “bites” and believes that there is such a thing as a “Marianas Web.” And bite people did. After the posting of this infographic (and similar ones, such as this 2014 image, “Levels of the Deep Web”),⁴ question-and-answer sites, such as Quora and the Dark Web site Hidden Answers, started seeing users ask variations on the question “How do I reach the Marianas Web?”⁵ In addition to these question sites, in my four years of participant observation on Dark Web social networking sites, I saw multiple people ask about the Marianas Web.

And, like so many Internet hoaxes, the Marianas Web has attracted articles that debunk it. Perhaps the most eloquent – and harsh – is from the blogger Violet Blue, who judges the meme to be “lurid, spooky bullshit... an epic troll that people have interpreted as fact.”⁶ Her desire to debunk the meme is in reaction to the fact that it started to be taken as fact not just by anxious Quora users or Dark Web ingenues, but also by Internet security firms peddling their services.

Debunking this meme is of course a valid pursuit. But debunking ignores important questions: why did this meme evoke such curiosity? What makes it possible for people to believe the meme? What does this say about the public perceptions of the Dark Web, as well as dialectics of contemporary digital culture?

Rather than critique this meme as untrue and thus dismiss it, I want to take it seriously. As Natale and Ballatore note about technological myths, “it is not important if a belief corresponds or not to reality,

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- 1 Adrian Chen, “The Underground Website Where You Can Buy Any Drug Imaginable,” *Magazine*, Gawker, June 1, 2011, <http://gawker.com/the-underground-website-where-you-can-buy-any-drug-imag-30818160>.
 - 2 Stephen Oliver, *Google Summer of Code 2012* (2016; repr., The Freenet Project, 2016), <https://github.com/freenet/wiki>.
 - 3 “Another Infographic of the Ocean...,” *Imgur*, September 1, 2012, <http://imgur.com/vvXru>.
 - 4 “Levels of the Deep Web,” *Image Sharing*, *Imgur*, January 10, 2014, <https://imgur.com/mEVm4hm>.
 - 5 For example, see the “Marianas Web” tag in Quora: <https://www.quora.com/topic/Marianas-Web>. As of 8 August 2018, that tag had 38 variations on the “How do I get to the Marianas Web?” question.
 - 6 Violet Blue, “The Myth of Mariana’s Web, the Darkest Corner of the Internet,” *Engadget*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.engadget.com/2015/12/18/the-myth-of-marianas-web-the-darkest-corner-of-the-internet/>.

but rather what it reveals about the cultural context from which it originated.⁷ As I will argue in this essay, even though it is “bullshit,” the Marianas Web does indeed reveal a great deal about our contemporary cultural context.

To explore the Marianas Web, I will first briefly explore scholarship on Internet memes and cultural myths, considering how a meme may scale up to such an extent that it becomes part of a larger societal fabric. I then briefly lay out the “ruthless semiotics” of actor-network theory to consider how memes-as-myths associate various elements. In this case, the Marianas Web associates the “Internet as ocean” metaphor, the trope of immaterial information, and contemporary post-truth politics, and I explore each in turn. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that the Marianas Web is *real*.

On Memes and Myths: From Subculture to Societal Scale

Internet memes and cultural myths are different things. But there are intriguing overlaps between the two.

Internet memes (hereafter, memes, with apologies to the Dawkinites) are defined by communication scholar Limor Shifman as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process.”⁸ Drawing on both biological definitions⁹ as well as the more recent popular culture conception¹⁰, Shifman notes that the concept of “meme” is attractive to digital media scholars for three reasons. First, they pass “along from person to person, yet gradually [scale] up into... shared social phenomenon.”¹¹ Second, they “reproduce by various means of imitation.”¹² Finally, they are diffused through digital media via “competition and selection.”¹³ Memes appear in a wild range of digital forms, from text to images to video. They often rely on picking out a key signifier within an original digital media object and placing it into a new (often incongruous or absurd) context, with subsequent memes building on the original recontextualization in a hyper-self-referential manner.¹⁴ Jean Burgess’s analysis of Youtube memes shows how specific signifiers within a video (in the case she studies, the breathing patterns of the singer of “Chocolate Rain”) are lifted from the original version and replicated, ad nauseam, in parody, remix, rebuttal, and (sometimes) cruel mockery.¹⁵ In the Marianas Web meme, the key signifier excised from an original context is the metaphor of “Internet as ocean” with a surface and depths. This connotation is overlaid with more specific layers, each containing obscure or deeply disturbing references (a point I will return to below).

As objects that are shared, iterative, and embedded in Internet communities where competition and selection are common practices, memes make for excellent markers for what can be called, following the British cultural studies of the 1970s, “subcultural” practices.¹⁶ Indeed, Shifman’s later article with Asaf Nissenbaum explores the use of memes in the online image board 4chan as tools for “contested

7 Simone Natale and Andrea Ballatore, “Imagining the Thinking Machine: Technological Myths and the Rise of Artificial Intelligence,” *Convergence*, June 20, 2017, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517715164>.

8 Limor Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (April 1, 2013): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>.

9 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

10 For example, the website Know Your Meme, at www.knowyourmeme.com.

11 Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World,” 364.

12 Shifman, 365.

13 Shifman, 365.

14 Shifman, 371.

15 Jean Burgess, “‘All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us’? Viral Video, Youtube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture,” in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to Youtube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 105.

16 Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (Birmingham: The Centre, 1975).

social capital.”¹⁷ As they argue, “the deep connection between memes and the culture of some online communities means that they function as cues of membership, distinguishing in-group members from mere passersby. In this sense,... memes constitute forms of cultural capital.”¹⁸ Command of the bewildering meanings of memes, from ironic to cruel, becomes a marker of in-group status within online communities.

Indeed, the “Marianas Web” meme has been used in precisely this way. Its use is predominantly within the subculture of privacy-conscious, anonymous network-using technophiles. To be more precise, this myth may seem limited to the *initiates* into such a culture, because, after all, the Marianas Web meme functions as a series of jokes meant to weed out those who simply don’t know better. In other words, the Marianas Web meme is a classic troll in the sense Whitney Phillips describes: something that was put online to see who would “bite” and take it seriously.¹⁹ For example, in my experience on Dark Web social networking sites, a weekly ritual involved a new user signing up and asking a variation on, “Ok, so I’ve made it to Tor. How do I go deeper? How do I get to the Marianas Web?” This would allow for another member of the social network to perform techno-elitism by patiently explaining that the Marianas Web does not exist, that there are no consumer-grade quantum computers, that there are no layers “deeper” than Tor (or Freenet, or I2P).²⁰ From this perspective, the jokey Marianas meme functions to help distinguish “in-group members from mere passersby.”

In contrast, while memes like the Marianas Web may appear to be limited to specific subcultures and their particular practices and symbolic economies, cultural myths, on the other hand, imply broader, society-wide shared belief.²¹ Writing about technological myths, Natale and Ballatore note that

The term "myth" resonates widely in the foundations of European cultural and media studies, particularly in the intellectual legacy of French semiotician Roland Barthes, who described "modern mythologies" as the dominant cultural ideologies of our time....²²

Natale and Ballatore draw on narrative studies of myths, which suggest that myths become ideologically powerful due in part to their repetition over time. As “narrative tropes... are repeated and circulated over and over again and are used in multiple contexts,” they can become deeply embedded in the cultural imaginary.²³ As Raymond Williams notes in *Keywords*, this meaning of “myth” is distinct from myth as a pejorative (as in, “the idea that X is true is a myth”). Anthropologists, Williams notes, saw myth as “an account of origins [and] as an active form of social organization.”²⁴ The relationship between myth as deep wisdom and myth as lie is a dialectic that probably will never be resolved, but Natale and Ballatore (following the insights of the sociology of scientific knowledge) note that, regardless of whether a myth is true or false, they must be explored because of their broad cultural significance.²⁵

Thus, it appears that Internet memes – tied as they are to (hyper) self-referential subcultural practices –

17 Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, “Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan’s/b/Board,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 4 (2017): 484.

18 Nissenbaum and Shifman, 485.

19 Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016).

20 Robert W. Gehl, *Weaving the Dark Web: Legitimacy on Freenet, Tor, and I2P* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

21 Indeed, going to the coiner of the term “meme,” Richard Dawkins, “cultural myth” may have more in common with what Dawkins meant, since he talked about the belief in God as a meme. See Shifman’s analysis in Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World.”

22 Natale and Ballatore, “Imagining the Thinking Machine,” 3.

23 Natale and Ballatore, 3.

24 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, vol. Rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 211.

25 Natale and Ballatore, “Imagining the Thinking Machine”; See John Law, “On Power and Its Tactics: A View from the Sociology of Science,” *The Sociological Review* 34, no. 1 (1986): 1–38 for a discussion of “strong symmetry” in the sociology of scientific knowledge.

may operate on a smaller scale than cultural myths. But, returning to Internet meme scholars, the gap between meme and myth may not be so wide, or at least not insurmountable. Shifman, Nissebaum, Burgess, and other meme scholars point to the potential for “scaling up” in memes as a key reason why scholars find them so fascinating. A connotation found within a meme may in fact become a broadly accepted way of thinking, a metaphor to live by. Indeed, although she wrote before the current concept of “meme” became popular, British cultural studies media scholar Marina Heck’s work on ideological analysis and semiotics points to a key path by which a limited signifier (in this case, a connotation limited to a specific subculture) may amplify to a societal level. Expanding on Barthes, Heck argues

the difference between myth and connotation depends on the *amplitude* of the lexicons from which the concepts are drawn. The connoted meaning in ‘pig=policeman’ and in ‘pig=male chauvinist’ are clearly linked to the lexicons of identifiable sub-groups. By contrast, myth seems identifiable with the lexicons of very large groups, if not of the society as a whole. *Myth therefore differs from connotation at the moment at which it attempts to universalize for the whole society meanings which are special to particular lexicons.* In the process of universalization, these meanings, which in the last instance are particular to certain lexicons, assume the amplitude of reality itself and are therefore “naturalized.” Thus, we might say, myths are connotations which have become dominant-hegemonic.²⁶

Thus, while a tightly-limited connotation found in a “certain lexicon” – whether it be the Black liberation movement term “pig” connoting “cop” or it be the network pundit term “ocean” connoting “Internet” – may, through a process of universalization, become a shared cultural symbol. In other words, memes can become amplified into myths. The very processes by which memes propagate – sharing, iteration, and articulation with cultural meanings – enable a meme to burst forth from a limited context into the broader cultural imaginary. This path from local to universalized may be contingent,²⁷ but there is no disputing the power of cultural myths, even if their origins are the joke-laden, ironic, sometimes cruel and nihilistic world of Internet memes. Their contingency, however, gives us a chance to trace them with anti-essentialist methods and theories. I turn to them next.

Associating Spatial Metaphors, Immateriality, and Post-Truth

For guidance on how the elements of the Marianas Web meme are brought together, we can turn to the actor-network theory (ANT) concept of *association*. Scholars such as John Law,²⁸ Madeleine Akrich,²⁹ Michel Callon,³⁰ and Bruno Latour³¹ have all explored the means by which disparate elements (which can be material artifacts, concepts, natural processes, or organizational practices) are brought together – associated – in any given artifact. In ANT analysis, there are no a priori assumptions about who or what has the power to bring together the elements; rather, the approach is highly empirical, tracing the relations that comprise the artifact and diagnosing the relations in terms of power. ANT has proven to

26 Marina Carmago Heck, “The Ideological Dimension of Media Messages,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79.*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 1980), 114, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=179321> My emphasis.

27 Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 19.

28 John Law, “Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy, and Heterogeneity,” *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 5, no. 4 (August 1992): 379–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01059830>.

29 Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society*, ed. Wiebe Bijker and John Law (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 205–224.

30 Michel Callon, “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay,” in *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, ed. John Law (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 169–233.

31 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford ;;New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

be methodologically supple, providing a language to describe how complex systems, including aircraft, hospitals, or social media are brought together and maintained.

While these systems are far more complex than an individual meme, ANT's roots in semiotic analysis keeps it quite relevant here. As John Law puts it,

Actor network theory is a ruthless application of semiotics. It tells that entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other entities. In this scheme of things entities have no inherent qualities: essentialist divisions are thrown on the bonfire of the dualisms.³²

Thus, this combination of "ruthless semiotics" and anti-essentialism is quite amenable to meme analysis. After all, memes are comprised of hyper-referential signifiers, and their ironic aspects certainly undermine any vestiges of essentialism (even if they invoke essentialism to ironic effect). Like any actor-network, a meme cannot be considered in isolation, but rather as part of larger webs of meaning, materiality, and practice.

Here, I turn to specific associations made within and through the Marianas Web meme, tracing the meme's connotations to larger ways of thinking about the Internet. Given the sheer complexity of the references, jokes, and parodies found within the Marianas Web meme, it is impossible to trace all connections, but here, the connections I trace go a long way towards explaining the broader cultural power of this meme-become-myth.

Deep Web: Boats, Nets, and Oceans

The simplest connotation in the Marianas Web meme is the metaphor of Internet as ocean. The Mariana Trench is, of course, the deepest point in any ocean on Earth. Its use in the Marianas Web meme as a symbol of a "Web beyond the Web," or deepest layer of the Internet, has its roots in early 2000s thinking about the capacities of Web search engines.

In the early 2000s, Google's search engine and algorithms helped alter how people viewed the World Wide Web. As John Battelle argues, thanks in large part to Google,

search has moved from a useful service on the edge of most Internet users' experience to the de facto interface for computing in the information age.... Search has become a universally understood method of navigating our information universe.... Put a search box in front of just about anybody, and he'll [sic] know what to do with it.³³

However, despite Google's triumph of crawling, collecting, and analyzing, in 2001 Michael Bergman of the consulting firm BrightPlanet sounded a note of caution:

Searching on the Internet today can be compared to dragging a net across the surface of the ocean. While a great deal may be caught in the net, there is still a wealth of information that is deep, and therefore, missed. The reason is simple: Most of the Web's information is buried far down on dynamically generated sites, and standard search engines never find it.³⁴

Bergman is now known as the coiner of the term "Deep Web," which refers to information beyond the

32 John Law, "After ANT: Complexity, Naming, and Topology," in *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Hassard and John Law (Oxford [England] ; Malden MA: Blackwell/Sociological Review, 1999), 3.

33 John Battelle, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture* (New York: Portfolio, 2005), 4.

34 Michael K. Bergman, "The Deep Web: Surfacing Hidden Value," *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 7, no. 1 (2001): 1, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/idx/jjep/3336451.0007.104/--white-paper-the-deep-web-surfacing-hidden-value?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

reach of Google, Yahoo, or Bing's indexing systems. The Deep Web, in this definition, includes Web sites behind paywalls, temporary sites created dynamically from the interaction between a browser and a database, and sites that contain media not easily indexed.

Today, thanks to Bergman's white paper, a common symbol of this hidden information is an ocean, with surface boats (standard search engines) trawling with dragnets, and submarines (customized, proprietary search engines) patrolling its depths. What do those submarines hope to find? Bergman's white paper on the Deep Web offers some answers: "the deep Web has the prospect of yielding quality results that cannot be obtained by any other means,"³⁵ results including "authoritative sites" such as government databases, shopping services, and publications.³⁶ Likewise, in their 2001 book *The Invisible Web*, Sherman and Price suggest that the Deep Web "contains vast amounts of authoritative and current information."³⁷ Even after almost two decades of Google searching, the Deep Web lives on in the information resource discovery literature; in his 2012 book *The Hidden Web*, school librarian William Scheeren notes "Even the most sophisticated searcher, no matter what search engine they use, is only touching the surface of the information available on the Internet."³⁸ Scheeren goes on to catalog a wealth of information sources for his target audience of graduate students in library sciences, arguing that they will need this information to satisfy their future patrons.

Thus, despite Google's mission to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful,"³⁹ critics have pointed to the Deep Web as evidence that there is always something beyond Google's (or Bing's, or Yahoo's) results. This is a repeated anxiety: no matter how deep one goes into the results returned by a standard Web search engine, there *must be something deeper*. There must be something more. For authors such as Bergman, Sherman and Price, or Scheeren, finding this deeper information would give businesses, entrepreneurs, students, or governments an edge on their counterparts who only remain on the surface. Using the ocean as a metaphor for digital information (a metaphor also found in phrases like "surfing the Web"), Bergman and others established a powerful way of thinking about the depths of informational resources. More important is their implication that we are *competing* to plumb these depths and find information that will give us an advantage in the knowledge economy.

In part, the Marianas Web meme taps into the anxiety that *someone else* (hackers, government agents, human traffickers) is already deep into The Network, and thus has control of the information that shapes our lives. The graphic replicates the spatial metaphor of Bergman's "ocean" to present the Internet as a series of layers. The surface – the tip of an informational iceberg – is familiar to us, comprised of the "Common Web." As the reader progresses through the five layers, however, things get more and more strange: Level 2 has "Google locked results" and "FTP servers." Level 3 features "sex tapes", "hackers," and "Mathmatics [sic] research. Level 4, the "Charter Web," promises "Personal Records," "Banned Books," and "Corporate Exchange." The deepest layer, Level 5, contains the most cryptic info of all: "The day you get here, is the day OP is no longer a faggot."⁴⁰ Thus, the only way for us to know what's going on and to truly be free, the infographic (satirically) implies, is to get deeper, no matter how difficult or frightening the journey may be.

35 Bergman, 10.

36 Bergman, 14.

37 Chris Sherman and Gary Price, *The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources Search Engines Can't See* (Medford, N.J.: CyberAge Books, 2001), xxi.

38 William O. Scheeren, *The Hidden Web a Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2012), <http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/?isbn=9781598846287>.

39 "Company," Blog, Google, accessed January 4, 2016, <https://www.google.com/about/company/>.

40 This offensive line should alert readers to the fact that the Marianas Web image is an example of trolling. Whitney Phillips has documented the purposeful use of offensive language (racist, homophobic, and misogynistic language in particular) as a key marker of trolling culture. See Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.

The “Immateriality” of Information

While “ocean-minded” ways of thinking about information and the Internet appear in specific forms (e.g., infographics that illustrate how information is searched), another element associated in the Marianas Web meme is the “Internet as immaterial” trope. This second aspect of the myth, that of immateriality, draws on broader cultural conceptions of how digital information can be distinguished from previous “material” media forms, especially paper.

For example, in their analysis of the Apple iMac G5 desktop computer’s place within postmodern capitalism, Schaefer and Durham note that the G5’s integration of CPU into a flat screen is symbolic of the eliding of networks of production.⁴¹ Apple’s marketing of the computer emphasized how “these once-cumbersome machines are blending with surrounding surfaces, no longer reminding users of the means through which computations are processed.”⁴² This shrinking of computing devices has of course only accelerated since Schaefer and Durham published their article in 2007. Not long after their article, the discourse of “cloud computing” gained prominence, as computational processes are shifted from end user devices to the cloud, a network diagram metaphor that emphasizes ephemerality and even immateriality.⁴³ Alongside this, CPUs have shrunk to fit not only into our pockets as smartphones, but also into a new range of embedded “Internet of Things” devices. Moreover, wireless networking also removes cumbersome reminders of networks, such as cables and modems. Perhaps the clearest vision of the immateriality trope is found in the Corning Corporation’s “A Day Made of Glass” promotional video, where nearly every surface in our homes, offices, and automobiles is a computer interface, with the materiality of the network itself nowhere to be found.⁴⁴

As the material reminders of the vast informational infrastructure recede into the background, and because the ultimate storage of information on computers is hidden from end users (often on distant server farms), many commentators on contemporary digital media have claimed that information is in fact immaterial and hence, endless. From Bill Gates’s call for “friction-free capitalism”⁴⁵ to inventor and Google engineer Ray Kurzweil’s futurism of immortality through digitization,⁴⁶ this cultural trope resonates with similar ideas about endless economic growth and the boundlessness of human thinking where atoms are replaced by (seemingly immaterial) bits.⁴⁷

The Marianas Web meme taps into this information-is-immaterial trope in two ways. First, the third deepest part of the infographic is labeled “80% of the Internet exists below this line...”, which is explained further: “This is rather not 80% of the *physical* information, but 80% of the information that effects [sic] you directly.”⁴⁸ Thus, the author invokes the metaphysics of boundless, immaterial information, in this case information that influences us against our wills. Second, the infographic invokes quantum computing. While quantum computing is an accepted computer science pursuit, the broader adjective “quantum” has been appropriated by New Age thinkers who rely upon the term to legitimate their mystical claims, a process the *RationalWiki* dubs “quantum woo.”⁴⁹ In this line of thinking, the “hard problem of consciousness” – the difficult question of *qualia*, or what makes us conscious beings – will not be explained in physical terms, but in the transformation of the physical

41 Peter D. Schaefer and Meenakshi Gigi Durham, “On the Social Implications of Invisibility: The iMac G5 and the Effacement of the Technological Object.,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 1 (March 2007): 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180701214520>.

42 Schaefer and Durham, 39.

43 Vincent Mosco, *To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014).

44 Corning, “A Day Made of Glass,” Video, YouTube, February 7, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cf7IL_eZ38.

45 Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold, and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (London: Viking, 1995).

46 *Inventor Ray Kurzweil Sees Immortality in Our Future*, PBS NewsHour (PBS, 2016), <https://www.pbs.org/video/inventor-ray-kurzweil-sees-immortality-in-our-future-1466121889/>.

47 Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

48 “Another Infographic of the Ocean...” my emphasis.

49 “Quantum Woo,” Wiki, *RationalWiki*, April 22, 2018, https://rationalwiki.org/w/index.php?title=Quantum_woo&oldid=1947670.

into the immaterial that happens (according to the New Agers) via quantum processes.⁵⁰ Here, the gap between material and immaterial is where God lives. Through these two invocations – of non-physical information that “effects” us and quantum computing – the Marianas Web meme articulates with broader cultural myths about the immateriality of information, as well as its powerful effects upon our lives.

Of course, the conception of information as immaterial and the spatial metaphors of oceans and icebergs contradict. The Mariana Trench, however deep, is still part of the materiality of Earth’s geology. It may be massive, but it is finite. The immateriality trope (and its related forms, like myths of “instant communication”) is predicated on ignorance of basic physics. Information is *always* material: it requires storage in material form, and moving it from place to place requires material transport. Given that the Earth is finite and it takes material and energy to store information, the immateriality concept is in fact ecologically destructive.⁵¹

However, returning to actor-network theory, it is possible for a thing to hold together contradictory elements in an association. The test is less about whether the contradictory elements truly belong together, and more about their effects in the world. In this case, the spread of the Marianas Web meme demonstrates the meme’s ability to hold together both the potential for mastering finite (cyber)space as well as the promise of endless information – if only one can dig deeper into the network.

Post-Truth Politics

Perhaps most prevalent in the Marianas Web – with the possible exception of illicit pornography – are invocations of mysterious conspiracy theories. They are particularly common in Level 4, with the caveat that one needs a “Closed Shell System” to see them: “Tesla Experiment Plans,” “Broder’s Engine Plans,” “WW2 Experiment Successes,” “Josef Mengele Successes,” “The Law of 13’s,” and of course, the “Location of Atlantis.” Conspiracy theories are of course nothing new, but they certainly have a particular resonance during the Donald Trump presidency. Indeed, as I write this, journalists are scrambling to unravel the “QAnon” conspiracy meme, a confusing mix of musings about the “Deep State” and a worldwide ring of shadowy Satanist pedophiles bent on global domination, with only Donald Trump standing in their way.⁵²

Conspiracy theories are an extreme symptom of “post-truth politics.” In his analysis of the uses of post-truth rhetorical strategies, Tim Gibson notes that the decline of symbolic efficiency noted by Žižek has been manifested in post-truth political rhetoric, wherein a powerful actor simply repeats something enough for it to stick and become part of common sense.⁵³ As Gibson defines it, post-truth politics refers to the

specific political and rhetorical strategies that emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims, a dynamic amplified (but not created) by an emergent

50 Tom Bartlett, “Has Consciousness Lost Its Mind?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Is-This-the-World-s-Most/243599>.

51 Mél Hogan, “Data Flows and Water Woes: The Utah Data Center,” *Big Data & Society* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 2053951715592429, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951715592429>; Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012); Katarina Damjanov, “Of Defunct Satellites and Other Space Debris: Media Waste in the Orbital Commons,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 166–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243916671005>.

52 Ryan Broderick, “It’s Looking Extremely Likely That QAnon Is A Leftist Prank On Trump Supporters,” BuzzFeed News, August 6, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatethis/its-looking-extremely-likely-that-qanon-is-probably-a>.

53 Timothy A. Gibson, “The Post-Truth Double-Helix: Reflexivity and Mistrust in Local Politics,” *International Journal of Communication*, Forthcoming.

and participatory digital media ecology.⁵⁴

Gibson draws on Anthony Giddens's observation of the self-reflexivity of late modernity, where institutions and practices are always open to being questioned. Such rational questioning of assumptions was a key marker of the Enlightenment, but now is spiraling into endless debates:

This loss of foundation then sets the discursive conditions necessary for the proliferation of popular mistrust. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we have peered behind the curtain, and discovered that the Big Other is just a bunch of fallible human beings, no different, really, than the rest of us.⁵⁵

In this sense, the proliferation of conspiracy theories that has arguably amplified since the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s should not be seen as irrational or paranoid, but in fact a symptom of the very sort of critical skepticism valued since the Enlightenment.⁵⁶ As Stef Aupers notes, we have moved from the sublime of Nature to the sublime of Modern Society, expressed in fear and awe of the "invisible, yet immensely powerful forces [that] are operative *behind the cultural screens, underneath and beyond the empirical surface* of modern life."⁵⁷

A consequence of this hyper-skepticism and the proliferation of signs within digital media is, of course, a wild cacophony of accusations, claims, fears, and jokes, and the Marianas Web meme takes part. The truth is out there, the Marianas Web promises. As a record of All The Things, the Internet must contain evidence of the powerful actors who shape our lives. If the Internet is arranged in layers, with each requiring increasing technical skill to access, *and* (despite the contradiction) the Internet is vast and infinite, the determined researcher can (theoretically) take the wool from their own eyes and come face to face with the hidden institutions that actually run the world.

Conclusion: The Marianas Web is Real

Here, I want to take my initial stance, that we should take memes like the Marianas Web seriously, to a logical extreme: I want to believe. I want to say the Marianas Web is real.

And, in a pragmatic sense, it *is* – or was – real: someone set up a Tor hidden service with its name. Certainly, the Marianas Web hidden service (now defunct, as so many Tor hidden services end up⁵⁸) simply added to the joke: it was a collection of cat facts. According to a thread on the Hidden Answers site (a Tor- and I2P-based hidden/Dark Web site), one "must read all cat facts before entry to [Marianas Web] is approved - skipping a cat fact will be noticed by the powers that be and your entry will be declined."⁵⁹ The Marianas Web, instantiated on the Dark Web as a joke site, becomes real through Internet meme practices of imitation and transformation.

But beyond someone setting up a Dark Web site titled "Marianas Web," the Marianas Web is also real in the sense that conspiracy theories have real-world effects. This is the ultimate test of any association of elements: that it affects the world. Witness InfoWars, QAnon, Pizzagate, all of which had consequences as people have appeared at Trump rallies, blocked commuter traffic, or most disturbingly, brought guns to small businesses to demand the truth. This is the point cultural and technological myth

54 Gibson.

55 Gibson.

56 Stef Aupers, "'Trust No One': Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture," *European Journal of Communication* 27, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 22–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323111433566>.

57 Aupers, 30 My emphasis.

58 Gehl, *Weaving the Dark Web: Legitimacy on Freenet, Tor, and I2P*.

59 Abbott53, "How Can I Access Mariana's Web?," Answers, Hidden Answers, December 23, 2015, <http://answerstedhctbek.onion/51337/how-can-i-access-marianas-web>. Note this is a Tor hidden service link; you must use the Tor browser to access it.

scholars, such as Natale and Ballatore, are making: myths *matter* to people. The Marianas Web meme as myth, while not strictly the same as the more recent QAnon meme, can possibly direct the real anxieties of people towards real ends: taking to streets, protesting, even violence. The desire to "go deeper" into a network and a desire to angrily confront perceived oppressors (including agents in the "Deep State") are perhaps not so distinct. We must take such meme/myths seriously, even if they were initially jokes to weed out the knowledgeable from the naïve.

Finally, a less sensationalistic yet no less real effect of the Marianas Web and its associated ideas of depth, immateriality, and post-truth is found in the marketing of "Dark Web" scans. Perhaps you have no desire to look past the "surface Internet" because you are afraid of what you will find. After all, the Marianas Web meme – not to mention so much coverage of the Dark Web – presents it as a terrifying place. As the saying goes, there's an app for that: the Dark Web scan offered by Experian, a consumer credit reporting agency. In a commercial, none other than America's Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, promotes the Dark Web scan. Giuliani looks solemnly at the camera and says, "With sixteen years in cybersecurity, I can tell you that criminals are scouring the Dark Web, trying to steal your identity and your personal information." That's why, the commercial narrator tells us, Experian "monitors the Dark Web globally and alerts you to suspicious activity, so you can act before a criminal can."⁶⁰ Experian's blog post defining the Dark Web features none other than the Iceberg/Ocean model of the Internet.⁶¹ Here, the line of thinking lampooned by the Marianas Web reappears as a terrifying sales pitch: pay for our credit monitoring service, or prepare to have your data hacked and sold on the Dark Web, the deepest layer of the Internet. Never mind the fact that, per Experian's privacy policy, in order to get the "Dark Web Scan," one must give one's "name, address, social security number, date of birth, telephone number and e-mail address" to Experian – the very personal information one ought to protect. This is also not to mention that, after providing this wealth of personal information, one must hope that *Experian itself* doesn't get hacked, like its competitor Equifax did.⁶²

Moving from real (if satirical) Dark Web sites to real bodies protesting global conspiracies to the "global scan" of Experian, we see the effects of the Marianas Web way of thinking. Ultimately, the Marianas Web meme has become cultural myth for understandable reasons: the promises of digital technology come along with terrifying perils of the unknown and of information overload. Our collective knowledge appears to grow infinitely, making each of us feel small and uninformed. The institutions which govern our lives appear to be more and more powerful and yet abstracted from our daily lives, with politicians who lie so many times that we believe them taking the helm. In the face of this, going deeper – even into a frightening, inscrutable, and ultimately bullshit network – seems like the only way forward.

60 "Experian Dark Web Scan TV Commercial, 'Experience' Featuring Rudy Giuliani," iSpot.tv, 2018, http://www.ispot.tv/ad/w_5i/experian-dark-web-scan-protect-yourself-featuring-rudy-giuliani.

61 Ellen Sirull, "What Is the Dark Web?," Experian, August 22, 2017, <http://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/what-is-the-dark-web/>.

62 See https://usa.experian.com/#/registration?offer=at_fcras105&br=exp&refUrl=%2Fidentity%2Factivity and click on "Privacy Policy" near the bottom. Link current as of this writing. If the link is inactive, for a full text of Experian's Dark Web Scan Privacy Policy, contact the author.

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