



THE INTERNET AS A SPACE

Not just a tool. A place.



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The Internet as a Space

What Does It Mean to Call the Internet a "Space"?

The term **“space”** suggests more than just a tool or technology—it implies an environment in which human interaction occurs. Like physical spaces, the internet has places we visit, hang out, get information, talk, or shop. These can be welcoming, hostile, busy, quiet, intimate, or public.

- **Websites = Buildings:** Think of a news site like walking into a library or an online shop like a supermarket.
- **Forums & Chatrooms = Cafés or Pubs:** People gather, argue, support each other, or hang out regularly.
- **Social Media = Town Square:** More akin to Speakers Corner. Public but surveilled. Many people speaking at once, often performative.
- **Dark Web = Back Alley:** Hidden, anonymous, and sometimes dangerous. But also used for privacy or whistleblowing.

The metaphor helps us ask:
Who owns this space? Who can
access it? What are the rules?

A Communicative Space

The internet is fundamentally about communication. Early online spaces—forums, message boards, and chatrooms—were built around the sharing of ideas, support, debate, and identity exploration. Today, platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Discord, and Reddit continue to serve as digital meeting places where people perform, argue, confess, organise, and connect.

Psychologist John Suler (2004) described the online disinhibition effect—the idea that people behave more freely or intensely online due to anonymity, invisibility, and the absence of immediate social feedback. This disinhibition can foster connection and authenticity, but also toxicity and abuse.

Online communicative spaces are shaped not only by who participates, but by how communication is facilitated:

- **Design choices matter:** A platform with character limits encourages brevity (X), while one with threading fosters deep conversations (Reddit).
- **Algorithms shape discourse:** Posts with higher engagement are amplified, often favouring polarisation or controversy.
- **Speech and identity:** Online spaces allow people to construct and perform different aspects of the self—sometimes liberating, sometimes misleading.
- **Positive effects:** Disclosure, identity experimentation, mutual support, and global collaboration.
- **Negative effects:** Trolling, harassment, misinformation, and echo chambers.

Understanding the communicative role of the internet means seeing it not as a passive medium, but as a space that actively shapes our conversations, beliefs, and communities.

The Commercialisation of Cyberspace

What once looked like a free digital commons has increasingly become a privatised shopping centre — shiny, convenient, but tightly controlled. Most platforms are run by large corporations whose primary goal is not community-building or democratic participation, but profit through data extraction. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) refers to this as surveillance capitalism—a model in which our personal data, behaviours, and emotional reactions are tracked and monetised.

- **Public expression happens in private places.** A tweet or Instagram post may feel like a public statement, but it takes place within the bounds of corporate-owned property—regulated not by civic law, but by profit-driven terms of service.
- **Search engines shape knowledge.** Algorithms determine what rises to the top of search results, and this visibility can be bought, gamed, or algorithmically skewed. Misinformation is often boosted if it's emotionally engaging or controversial (Noble, 2018).
- **You are not the customer—you are the product.** The internet is increasingly structured to maximise engagement, not understanding, making it harder to distinguish between content, advertisement, and manipulation.

The Disappearing Digital Public Sphere

The internet was once envisioned as a new kind of civic space—a revitalisation of Jürgen Habermas’s (1962) public sphere, where people could come together to debate, inform, and participate in democratic discourse. In practice, this potential has been deeply undermined by the consolidation of power in a handful of tech platforms.

- **Access is controlled.** Participation can be limited by platform bans, algorithmic suppression, censorship, or economic barriers such as paywalls and subscriptions.
- **Information is curated by opaque systems.** What you see online isn’t neutral—it’s prioritised for profitability, relevance, or behavioural influence. The logic of engagement replaces the logic of the commons.
- **“Community guidelines” enforce corporate ethics, not democratic ones.** Decisions about what can be said are made behind closed doors, often without transparency or accountability, and with little appeal.

The result is a digital sphere that often feels public, but functions more like a brand-managed space than a town hall.

Inequality in Digital Spaces

Not everyone experiences the internet in the same way. Structural inequalities that exist offline are mirrored—and sometimes magnified—online. These digital divides aren't just about access; they are about how people are able to participate and be seen.

- **Infrastructure:** Fast internet, up-to-date devices, and uninterrupted electricity are far from universal.
- **Digital literacy:** Understanding how platforms work, how to evaluate online information, and how to navigate digital risks are unevenly distributed.
- **Algorithmic visibility:** Some voices and content are routinely downranked or shadow-banned, while others are pushed to the front—often without users knowing why.

Even in niche communities like Incel forums, user experience is shaped by the platform's design. Echo chambers, radicalisation, and social exclusion aren't just ideological—they are architectural outcomes of how digital spaces are built and maintained (Calderon-Smith, 2025).

So What Can Be Done?

Push for open, public platforms.

Advocate for alternative social media and community spaces not controlled by corporations. Support federated platforms like Mastodon or public-interest platforms funded by civic bodies.

Demand transparency and accountability from tech companies.

Hold companies to account over their algorithmic decision-making, content moderation, and data practices. Join digital rights campaigns or follow groups like the EFF (Electronic Frontier Foundation).

Support digital literacy education.

Understanding how the internet works is crucial to navigating it safely and critically. CEAR offers digital literacy services and training for schools, professionals, and individuals—get in touch to learn more.

Protect privacy and resist surveillance.

Use privacy-conscious tools like encrypted messengers, ad blockers, and VPNs. Learn to manage your data footprint and question what you're giving away and why.

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