



Inside the Intellectual Dark Web

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*The intellectual dark web has outsmarted the cultural left's gatekeepers by speaking directly to a growing audience of millions of conservatives, classical liberals and libertarians, writes Gideon Rozner.*

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For the first few seconds, you think you're in for something incendiary, even faintly satanic. The YouTube video opens with the show's emblem: a cartoonish image of the host, grinning maniacally, a third eye drawn on his forehead. The image spins, the host's voice is heard, and the show gets underway.

It's not the kind of introduction you'd expect for a highly intellectual discussion that lasts almost three hours. Yet that is what episode 1006 of the [Joe Rogan Experience](#) consists of: comedian Joe Rogan moderating a long and thoughtful conversation between clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson and evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein. Topics range from freedom of speech and



identity politics to ethics and economics. And despite differences in their politics, Peterson and Weinstein speak to each other calmly and respectfully, making it through the whole three hours without so much as raising their voice.

The video is typical of the unlikely political movement known as the ‘intellectual dark web’ (IDW): a distinctive mix of subversiveness and intellectual rigour, guided by conservative, classical liberal and libertarian philosophy. Thousands of similar videos exist online, as well as podcasts, blogs and independent news websites.

What more, millions are tuning in. Joe Rogan’s YouTube channel has more than 3.5 million subscribers, and his podcast is downloaded over 30 million times each month. Numbers are similarly healthy for Rogan’s contemporaries, such as [Ben Shapiro](#) and [Dave Rubin](#). Similarly, Dennis Prager’s [PragerU](#) series—consisting of short ‘explainer’ videos on a range of political, economic or philosophical issues—regularly boasts audiences in the millions.

Meanwhile, the surging IDW audience is rapidly outstripping that for conventional—or ‘mainstream’—news outlets. A recent interview by Joe Rogan, for example, has been viewed more than 12 million times on YouTube alone. CNN’s prime time line-up, by contrast, is lucky to muster a million views across an entire evening.

## WELCOME TO THE IDW

At its heart, the IDW is a cohort of academics, journalists and commentators who rose to internet fame with ideas going against the zeitgeist of the cultural left. In a piece widely credited for putting the IDW on the public radar, the [New York Times’ Bari Weiss](#) describes the movement as ‘a rolling conversation—on podcasts, YouTube and Twitter, and in sold-out auditoriums—that sounds unlike anything else happening, at least publicly, in the culture right now’.

Mathematician Eric Weinstein, another leading figure of the movement, coined the name. Borrowed from the real dark web—the internet’s shadowy underworld home to hackers, fraudsters and all manner of online black markets—the *intellectual* dark web trades in something far less sinister, though often more controversial: ideas.

The ideas themselves vary, owing to the unusually diverse political background of the movement’s adherents. Jordan Peterson, probably the IDW’s most prominent figure, is broadly conservative, if somewhat mercurial. Joe Rogan is regarded as libertarian. Commentator and talk show host Dave Rubin became disillusioned with the American left and now calls himself a classical liberal. Philosopher and self-proclaimed ‘freedom feminist’ Christina Hoff Sommers has described herself as ‘a registered Democrat with libertarian leanings’. Others still, such as Bret Weinstein and neuroscientist Sam Harris, supported Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton respectively.

WHILE POLITICALLY CORRECT ORTHODOXY IS FIXATED ON IDENTITY  
POLITICS AND POSTMODERN NIHILISM, THE IDW IS PROVING CLASSICAL  
LIBERAL IDEAS STILL MATTER



Despite its diversity of thought, the IDW has clear unifying principles. An unofficial IDW website lists a few common convictions: freedom of speech; rejection of identity politics and regard for the individual; rationality over emotion; and a commitment to truth. Importantly, the list also includes ‘a willingness to engage in conversations with people who have different beliefs and political viewpoints’. The IDW is not just about ideas, it is a meta-conversation about the way in which we should communicate and discuss those ideas. At a time when public debate consists largely of confected outrage, the IDW is reviving the art of respectful disagreement.

The emphasis on free speech and civilised debate is understandable. Many of the IDW’s leading thinkers were catapulted to internet fame after butting their heads against the intellectual monoculture of the left. Jordan Peterson famously refused to comply with Canadian laws mandating the use of genderneutral pronouns. Bret Weinstein’s position at Evergreen College became untenable after he refused to participate in a ‘day of absence’ in which white students and faculty were asked to stay away from campus. Dave Rubin publicly fell out with his one-time stablemates at the left-wing *Young Turks* web series, accusing them of intellectual dishonesty and an irrational hostility to divergent views.

The IDW is therefore more than just a rallying point for principles such as free speech and the rejection of identity politics. It is also a space for the kind of discussion that is increasingly disappearing from the public square. One wonders how mere conversation became so controversial that it became ‘dark’.

## THE BLACK MARKET OF IDEAS

Belief in open debate drove Australian psychologist and writer Claire Lehmann to found [Quillette](#), a news website and self-proclaimed ‘platform for free thought’. As the website explains: ‘We respect ideas, even dangerous ones. We also believe that free expression and the free exchange of ideas help human societies flourish and progress’. ‘I just wanted there to be a website that reflected some more nuanced positions than what I was seeing,’ Lehmann explains, speaking to the IPA earlier this year. But nuance does not mean an aversion to controversy. ‘We get a lot of [articles] from young people who want to explore dangerous or taboo topics in a measured and evidencebased manner.’

Lehmann mentions one example, an article she received from an African American student at Columbia University. ‘It’s about racism and about how disparities in outcomes are not necessarily always caused by discrimination. He wanted to present his case, which was very well-argued, logically presented and thoughtful, and he said to us: “I just don’t know anywhere else that would publish this piece”.’

In the three years since its launch, *Quillette* has attracted a sizeable audience. It has received strong praise from the likes of Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris, and Christina Hoff Sommers, who has called the website ‘an oasis of reason in a sea of madness’. *Quillette* is hence widely regarded as the IDW’s premier online news site.



Lehmann is cautious about labels, seeing them as a precursor to the kind of tribalism she opposes. Still, she is positive about the intellectual freedom and audience reach offered by the IDW, enabled by the internet:

“I see the intellectual dark web as an online community where people are testing out new ideas and are directly communicating with an audience. It’s that communication with an online audience without having to go through any kind of mainstream institution that’s probably the defining characteristic. What’s cool about the intellectual dark web—if you want to call it that—is simply that people like Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson and others have views and opinions that are not considered respectable views in mainstream media, particularly in America, but that hasn’t stopped them because of the internet. Because of the internet they’re not censored at all, and they’ve developed huge followings of their own, simply by bypassing those traditional, prestigious institutions such as mainstream media and, to some extent, the universities.”

The internet is the artery through which the ideas of the IDW flow. As Lehmann notes, mediums like online videos, blogs and podcasting allow for the transmission of content directly to the audience, circumventing the editors, proprietors and other ‘gatekeepers’ of conventional media outlets.

#### FREE SPEECH IS BACK IN VOGUE, EMERGING AS A KIND OF COUNTERCULTURE CHALLENGING THE TRIBALISM, DOGMA AND DOWNRIGHT NUTTINESS OF THE LEFT

*Quillette* is also an example of the way in which, in addition to impressive audience numbers, the IDW is attracting hefty financial support. The site has become so influential that it rakes in tens of thousands of dollars per month in voluntary donations, gathered via artistic crowdfunding website Patreon. Lehmann is far from the only IDW figure to use the platform. Jordan Peterson, for example, is reported to be earning just under US\$1 million a year from Patreon alone. Ironically, such revenue streams have allowed the IDW the kind of media ‘independence’ that has long been an ideal of the left, owing to its disdain for all things ‘commercial’.

The IDW is not the first intellectual movement driven by self-publication. Patriots of the American Revolution were prolific pamphleteers, for example, and several literary movements owe their existence to inexpensive broadsides, chapbooks and ‘little magazines’. Self-publication is not a new phenomenon, but has been turbo-charged by the internet— particularly social media. Through platforms including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, IDW content reaches audiences of millions.

But reach alone does not account for the importance of ‘new media’ to the IDW. As journalist and documentary film-maker David Fuller explains, online platforms have allowed for the kind of long and thoughtful discussion that has become the hallmark of the IDW:



“The IDW phenomenon is entirely a creation of the internet ... It needed the internet to allow [its] ideas to develop and evolve, and particularly the lack of time constraint on a YouTube show that can unpack ideas over three hours rather than the five-minute broadcast media interview—which encourages polarisation and ideological simplicity rather than nuance.”

The rise of the IDW comes as trust in mainstream media is in freefall, with a recent survey by Edelman Australia indicating 60 per cent of Australians are ‘disengaged’ with news from larger organisations. The popularity of the IDW’s long-form discussions is a rejection of media fare like rehearsed talking points and ‘gotcha’ interviews. It is also a revolt against superficial political panels in which conservative voices are (sometimes) included as an exercise in tokenistic box-ticking, rather than a genuine attempt at debate.

Young people in particular are rapidly turning to alternative sources of news offered by social media. A study by YouGov, for example, indicates almost a quarter of millennials in the US consider social media to be their main source of news, compared with 12 per cent for Generation X and five per cent among baby boomers.

This may explain why the ideas of the IDW are particularly popular among younger audiences. As IPA Executive Director John Roskam [reported in these pages in May](#), attendees at Jordan Peterson’s sold-out event in Melbourne were overwhelmingly younger, with 70 per cent of the crowd being males under the age of 30. As Roskam noted: ‘After the applause finally died down, the crowd sat in rapt silence to listen to a professor of psychology talk without notes for two hours about the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence’.

THERE IS NOTHING ‘ALTERNATIVE’ ABOUT THE IDW—MUCH OF ITS CORE PHILOSOPHY CAN BE TRACED BACK CENTURIES. THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT IT IS REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

The unlikely popularity of the likes of Peterson refutes the worst about what we tend to believe about contemporary political discourse, if not the human race in general. It turns out people *don’t* have attention spans too short for anything other than glib soundbites. They *do* welcome new ideas. While our adversarial political system encourages ideological ‘silos’, the popularity of IDW content shows people want dialogue. At a time when political parties trade in simplicity, many are going to the IDW for complexity. And while politically correct orthodoxy is fixated on identity politics and postmodern nihilism, the IDW is proving classical liberal ideas still matter, not least of all to young people.

Naturally, the IDW has attracted vitriol from the cultural left. One tactic is to malign the IDW as the ‘thinking wing’ of the so-called ‘alt-right’ (short for alternative right), a somewhat ill-defined coalition of groups on the political fringe that reject conventional conservative and libertarian philosophy in favour of murkier, and often racist, ideologies. Recent events including the 2017 Unite the Right rally—culminating in the Charlottesville riots—have been attributed to the alt-right.

If there is a similarity between the IDW and the alt-right, it is the common ‘jumping off’ point: a rejection of the cultural left. Irish academic Angela Nagle, who has written extensively about the alt-right, explains:

“There are all kinds of characters in [the alt-right] that appeal to different people for different reasons. But I suppose the main thing that they have in common ... is they feel they have stumbled upon this dark truth ... [which is] basically a belief that the various societal norms and taboos—around race or culture or gender— are bullshit and they’re poking holes in all of it.”

But while the IDW and the alt-right reject the left’s fixation with superficialities like race and gender, their reaction to it makes them totally different phenomena. The alt-right represents a kind of inversion of identity politics, with constituent movements that include noxious strains of white nationalism. The IDW, by contrast, tends to reject identity politics in all its forms, whether it emanates from the increasingly authoritarian left, or the paranoid screwballs on the alt-right. Besides, there is nothing ‘alternative’ about the IDW: much of its core philosophy can be traced back centuries. The difference is reaching new audiences. Misguided as it may be, the conflation with the alt-right continues to cause problems for the IDW. The absurd notion is gaining alarming traction within the hipster monoculture of the Silicon Valley, where tech giants are clamouring to vanquish ‘hate speech’ from their platforms. Alex Jones—a kooky but generally harmless conspiracy theorist—hardly fits the IDW bill, but his blackballing from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (among others) set a dangerous precedent.

The slippery slope of online censorship has already encroached on the IDW. At time of writing, over 80 PragerU videos remain on YouTube’s list of ‘restricted’ content, making it difficult for young people in particular to access them. Most of the blacklisted videos are ones that examine and criticise articles of faith among the left. Is America racist? What is ‘intersectionality’? Does Israel really discriminate against Arabs? Controversial ideas, perhaps, but hardly dangerous.

It is a particularly worrying trend, considering the IDW’s operating model. The IDW’s success has been built on the use of online platforms to proliferate ideas to which the left-leaning mainstream media is largely hostile. The experience of Alex Jones and PragerU suggests social media companies are increasingly in the business of deciding what content is acceptable, and what isn’t. Still, there is a limit to which tech giants can get away with wiping swathes of content from their platforms. Given the IDW’s extraordinary audience numbers, ‘no-platforming’ the likes of Jordan Peterson and Joe Rogan may be, if nothing else, impossible commercially.

## THE NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

I met James for coffee one morning as I was researching this piece. Captain of his high school, James had made contact weeks earlier about having someone from the IPA address fellow students. Sadly, the idea had been scuttled on the basis of trumped-up concerns about ‘procedure’ not being followed. (No such issues had been raised in relation to previous guest



speakers invited by students.)

But I left the meeting feeling optimistic. Yes, almost all the staff at his school were left-wing, but that had become a kind of running joke among many of his classmates, who saw the bias for what it was. Many students were tuned into the IDW, particularly Jordan Peterson, who had something of a cult following. James and his friends even had their own podcast which, as I later found out, was irreverent, funny, and above all, unconstrained by political correctness.

As we've seen, James and his friends are emblematic of the IDW's impact. Values such as free speech and individual freedom are back in vogue, emerging as a kind of counter-culture that is increasingly challenging the tribalism, dogma and downright nuttiness of the left. And in this latest skirmish in the battle of ideas, it looks like the unlikely warriors of the intellectual dark web are increasingly winning.