



The Dark Net: Inside the Digital Underworld

By Jamie Bartlett

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An *Independent* and *New Statesman* Book of the Year

Beyond the familiar online world that most of us inhabit—a world of Google, Facebook, and Twitter—lies a vast and often hidden network of sites, communities, and cultures where freedom is pushed to its limits, and where people can be anyone, or do anything, they want. This is the world of Bitcoin and Silk Road, of radicalism and pornography. This is the Dark Net.

In this important and revealing book, Jamie Bartlett takes us deep into the digital underworld and presents an extraordinary look at the internet we don't know. Beginning with the rise of the internet and the conflicts and battles that defined its early years, Bartlett reports on trolls, pornographers, drug dealers, hackers, political extremists, Bitcoin programmers, and vigilantes—and puts a human face on those who have many reasons to stay anonymous.

Rich with historical research and revelatory reporting, *The Dark Net* is an unprecedented, eye-opening look at a world that doesn't want to be known.

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Editorial Review

Review

An NPR Best Book of 2015

Included in *The Washington Post's* Notable Nonfiction of 2015

“Bartlett combines an insider’s expertise with a neophyte’s tale of discovery. Rather than measure the pros and cons of the Web, he maps its frontiers without judgment. The result is a lucid inquiry into the relationship between technology and freedom that’s also a captivating beach book.”

—*Washington Post*

A Best Summer Books pick by Kevin Nguyen, NPR's "On Point"

“A welcome deep dive into the anonymous Internet.”

—*Flavorwire, The 15 Best Nonfiction Books of the Year So Far*

“One of the truly indispensable works of nonfiction released in 2015.”

—**Jonathon Sturgeon, Flavorwire**

“It is Bartlett’s plentiful and fascinating interviews with the denizens of the dark net that make his book so compelling... Quite worrying, a bit disgusting, highly voyeuristic, and occasionally very funny: this is the nature of both the dark net and *The Dark Net*.”

—*Barnes & Noble Review*

“Bartlett is the ideal guide: capable and ever-ready to ferry the reader to the dark side of the Internet.”

—*Flavorwire, 10 Must-Read Books for June*

“Fascinating...a provocative journey through the deep web’s history, its varied guiding philosophies, and the bizarre, iconoclastic, often criminal behaviors it conceals and energizes.”

—*Brooklyn Rail*

“Bartlett doesn’t just tell us about the dark net; he also rips through the cloak of anonymity to let us meet some of its denizens... It’s a disturbing book, but it’s meant to be.”

—*Booklist*

“A provocative excursion to the darker side of human nature set free by the anonymous and unregulated boundaries of cyberspace.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Reveals a hidden, seedy world where people lurk behind pseudonyms and dupe others into revealing their bodies on camera to be used against them in public shaming. If you’re shocked to discover that last year approximately 20 per cent of drug users bought their stash online, you’ll find this fascinating. Bartlett is an able guide on a journey through the margins of the web.”

—*Max Wallis, Independent, Books of the Year*

“A judgement-free look at the mechanics of trolling and other internet bad behaviour and generates more light than heat.”

—Helen Lewis, *New Statesman, Books of the Year*

“A hell of an achievement . . . Buy it and read it.”

—Hugo Rifkind, *The Times (London)*

“Bartlett anatomises the usual bogeymen and demonstrates that they’re real. *The Dark Net* is, for anyone engaged with the web and the effects it is having on our culture, necessary reading . . . a flashlight in a dark, dark cellar.”

—Michael Bywater, *Spectator*

“A fascinating and disturbing exploration of the outer edges of the internet and the human mind.”

—Josh Cohen

“A fascinating and disturbing journey through the furthest recesses of the Internet. Jamie Bartlett is an expert guide . . . he shines an invaluable light on a world that remains determinedly opaque.”

—Ian Burrell, *Independent*

“[A] thorough and assiduously researched account of the deviantly erotic, subversive and criminal aspects of web life.”

—Bryan Appleyard, *Sunday Times*

“A confident and well-informed guide . . . By meeting the people behind the online activity, Bartlett humanises it.”

—Douglas Heaven, *New Scientist*

“*The Dark Net* offers smart, provoking reportage from the crooked crannies of digital culture, married to a quietly impressive analysis of how technology is amplifying both the best and the worst of us. Required reading for anyone looking to escape media hysteria and get to grips with the 21st century’s most compelling, discomfiting complexities.”

—Tom Chatfield

“A well-researched book, studded with enlightening interviews.”

—Mail on Sunday

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

JAMIE BARTLETT is the Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at the think tank Demos, where he specializes in online social movements and the impact of technology on society. Prior to his work with Demos, he was a research associate at the international humanitarian agency Islamic Relief and conducted field research in Pakistan and Bangladesh. A graduate of the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford, Bartlett writes a weekly column on technology for the Telegraph and is a frequent commentator for media outlets throughout the world. He lives in London.

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INTRODUCTION

LIBERTY OR DEATH

I have heard rumors about this website, but I still cannot quite believe that it exists. I am looking at what I think is a hit list. There are photographs of people I recognize—prominent politicians, mostly—and, next to each, an amount of money. The site’s creator, who uses the pseudonym Kuwabatake Sanjuro, thinks that if you could pay to have someone murdered with no chance—I mean absolutely zero chance—of being caught, you would. That’s one of the reasons why he has created the Assassination Market. There are four simple instructions listed on its front page:

- >Add a name to the list**
- >Add money to the pot in the person’s name**
- >Predict when that person will die**
- >Correct predictions get the pot**

The Assassination Market can’t be found with a Google search. It sits on a hidden, encrypted part of the internet that, until recently, could only be accessed with a browser called The Onion Router, or Tor. Tor began life as a U.S. Naval Research Laboratory project, but today exists as a not-for-profit organization, partly funded by the U.S. government and various civil liberties groups, allowing millions of people around the world to browse the internet anonymously and securely. To put it simply, Tor works by repeatedly encrypting computer activity and routing it via several network nodes, or “onion routers,” in so doing concealing the origin, destination, and content of the activity. Users of Tor are untraceable, as are the websites, forums, and blogs that exist as Tor Hidden Services, which use the same traffic encryption system to cloak their location.

The Assassination Market may be hosted on an unfamiliar part of the net, but it’s easy enough to find, if you know how to look. All that’s required is simple (and free) Tor software. Then sign up, follow the instructions, and wait. It is impossible to know the number of people who are doing exactly that, but at the time of writing, if I correctly predict the date of the death of Ben Bernanke, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve, I’d receive approximately \$56,000.

It may seem like a fairly pointless bet. It’s very difficult to guess when someone is going to die. That’s why the Assassination Market has a fifth instruction:

- >Making your prediction come true is entirely optional**

THE DARK NET

The Assassination Market is a radical example of what people do online when under the cover of real or perceived anonymity. Beyond the more familiar world of Google, Hotmail, and Amazon lies another side to the internet: the dark net.

For some, the dark net refers to the encrypted world of Tor Hidden Services, where users cannot be traced, and cannot be identified. For others, it is those sites not indexed by conventional search engines: an unknowable realm of password-protected pages, unlinked websites, and hidden content accessible only to those in the know, sometimes referred to as the “deep web.” It has also become a catchall term for the myriad shocking, disturbing, and controversial corners of the net—the realm of imagined criminals and lurking predators.

The dark net, for me, describes an idea more than a particular place: internet underworlds set apart yet

connected to the internet we inhabit, worlds of freedom and anonymity, where users say and do what they like, often uncensored, unregulated, and outside of society's norms. It is dark because we rarely see these parts of digital life, save the occasional flash of a hysterical news report or shocking statistic. This is not a book about Tor, since the net is full of obscure corners, of secret back alleys on parts of the internet you likely already know: social media sites, normal websites, forums, chat rooms. I focus instead on those digital cultures and communities that appear, to those that aren't part of them, dark, insidious, and beyond society's gaze—wherever I found them.

This dark net is rarely out of the news—with stories of young people sharing homemade pornography, of cyberbullies and trolls tormenting strangers, of hackers stealing and leaking personal photos, of political or religious extremists peddling propaganda, of illegal goods, drugs, and confidential documents only a click or two away appearing in headlines almost daily—but it is still a world that is, for the most part, unexplored and little understood. In reality, few people have ventured into the darker recesses of the net to study these sites in any detail.

I started researching radical social and political movements in 2007, when I spent two and a half years following Islamist extremists around Europe and North America, trying to piece together a fragmented and largely disjointed real-world network of young men who sympathized with al-Qaeda ideology. By the time I'd finished my work in 2010, the world seemed to be different. Every new social or political phenomenon I encountered—from conspiracy theorists to far-right activists to drug cultures—was increasingly located and active online. I would frequently interview the same person twice—once online and then again in real life—and feel as if I was speaking to two different people. I was finding parallel worlds with different rules, different patterns of behavior, different protagonists. Every time I thought I'd reached the bottom of one online culture, I discovered other connected, secretive realms still unexplored. Some required a level of technical knowhow to access, some were extremely easy to find. Although an increasingly important part of many people's lives and identities, these online spaces are mostly invisible: out of reach and out of view. So I went in search of them.

My journey took me to new places online and offline. I became the moderator of an infamous trolling group and spent weeks in forums dedicated to cutting, starving, or killing yourself. I explored the labyrinthine world of Tor Hidden Services in search of drugs, and to study child pornography networks. I witnessed online wars between neo-Nazis and antifascists on popular social media sites, and signed up to the latest porn channels to examine current trends in homemade erotica. I visited a Barcelona squat with anarchist Bitcoin programmers, run-down working men's clubs to speak to extreme nationalists, and a messy bedroom to observe three girls make a small fortune performing sexually explicit acts on camera to thousands of viewers. By exploring and comparing these worlds, I also hoped to answer a difficult question: do the features of anonymity and connectivity free the darker sides of our nature? And if so, how?

The Dark Net is not an effort to weigh up the pros and cons of the internet. The same anonymity that allows the Assassination Market to operate also keeps whistleblowers, human-rights campaigners, and activists alive. For every destructive subculture I examined there are just as many that are positive, helpful, and constructive.

Because the internet has become so interwoven into the fabric of our lives, it presents a challenge to our existing notions of anonymity, privacy, freedom, and censorship—throwing up new challenges not yet resolved: should we have the right to complete anonymity online? Are our “digital” identities distinct from our “real” ones—and what does that mean? Are we prone to behave in particular ways when we sit behind a screen? What are the limits of free expression in a world where every idea is a click away? Particularly since the revelations of the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, these questions

dominate debates and discussion about the role of internet privacy and freedom in an increasingly digital world. I don't propose any easy answers or solutions. I'm not sure that there are any. This book is not a polemic—more modestly, it is a series of portraits about how these issues play out at the fringes. I leave it entirely to you to decide what you think it means.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Philip Raber:

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