

TRADITIONAL FORUMS ARE BETTER THAN SOCIAL MEDIA!

Since its inception, [social media](#) has been advertised as supposedly being a means of bringing people closer together and helping facilitate conversation and interaction. However, it seems increasingly clear (in both my opinion and evidently those of many others – especially in recent years) that such claims do not [hold water](#). Indeed, not only do such claims seem to fall short, but almost the opposite seems to apply: the more social media dominates, the more [myopic](#) people's interactions seem to become and the more it seems that people are losing their ability to have their voices fairly heard or in some cases to even sustain their own independent thoughts.

I'll be straight with you: I have *never* liked social media – not even at the start.

The only thing about social media that has ever interested me is the ability to connect with and support other people who are into in the same interests (or else at least pursuing some solution to some practical problem, of course). Indeed, I have only ever joined social media sites in the hopes of (1) interacting with fellow people pursuing such worthwhile diversions and (2) sharing my own thoughts and creative work so that it is not just "lost in the void" but also benefits others.

I'm sure many (all?) of you can relate to that. Metaphorically, talking to empty space feels bad, or at least it does if that's *all* you do or if it *feels* that way. I mean, personally I am quite content to be on my own most of the time. There is a great tranquility and freedom in that. However, there always comes a time when it would be invigorating to share with a community and feel (and *be*) heard and seen.

Social media is not that community though. Not really anyway. It is too infested with centralized control, [economic parasitism](#), censorship, [groupthink](#), and toxicity. Luckily though, there is a kind of community that is usually better: [forums](#).

Indeed, in recent years, I have been feeling ever increasing levels of distaste for social media (including – and in fact *especially* – Reddit) and not just that but more broadly speaking distaste of practically all big "tech" companies in general. I put the word "tech" in quotes here because I am no longer convinced that these companies even deserve to be able to claim that they are in the business of technology anymore. They have largely turned into little more than economic parasites and self-appointed (but increasingly out-of-touch and maladaptive) taste makers and [propagandists](#). They are not merely "advertising-supported" anymore: they have practically lost all sight of the [social contract](#) implicit in what it means to genuinely pursue technology with a real spirit of love for technology in itself.

I can barely even remember the last time I looked forward to any update (whether software or hardware) from any of the "big tech" companies. Indeed I *dread* them. Nearly every update seems to do little more than just force more and more unwanted and user-hostile changes upon everyone. I am utterly sick of it and have had far more than enough it. I am sure that many of you also feel the same. In fact, I have already heard so many times. This is not the tech future that any *sane* and *ethical* person ever wanted. Tech in the 1990s felt *vastly* more hopeful. Furthermore, there isn't even a real reason it has to be this way (contrary to tech company propaganda and [rhetoric](#)). The out-of-touch tech companies just *forced* it to be so.

Well, I think it's high time we all do more of what's in our power to reduce the influence of these kinds of one-sided exploiters who pose as "tech" companies.

Foremost among what we need to do to start setting the future back on a better path again is to minimize the amount of centralized power that exists on the internet as much as possible. We need the internet's power to be as decentralized and structurally outside the control of the hands of the few as possible. The internet needs to become more fragmentary again, like an [archipelago](#), like it originally was.

Those broader trends are clearly relevant to the nature of the difference between social media and forums. I went on a tangent about those broader trends because it is relevant and helps frame one's thoughts about why a return to forums matters beyond merely being more practical and less anxiety-inducing as a way of connecting.

Consider this possibility: Traditional forums may not be less active for *natural* reasons. They may in fact be being suppressed by tech companies in search results *deliberately* in an effort to try to destroy decentralized communities and hence to destroy the existence of alternatives that are outside the scope of their control. That would perfectly fit the utter disregard for user well-being of these companies. [Social engineering](#) and mass manipulation of people's attention is their specialty.

So, that's perhaps the biggest reason to prefer forums over social media: the future of human freedom itself is being critically endangered by big "tech" companies. Using forums more often (or hosting them yourself!) would help counteract that some.

It is also important to note, however, that I mean specifically *traditional* forums (such as [phpBB](#) and [the various other internet forum software packages out there](#)) and definitely *not* forums that have influential upvoting or downvoting systems and hence definitely *not* Reddit. Hierarchical formats are fine, but not voting. Voting in a forum encourages groupthink, which is among the worst of the forces that afflict the modern internet and by far among the most harmful. Reddit is the *worst* social media.

There are a great many other reasons to prefer forums too though, and that (the more cheerful part of this [article/essay](#)) is the subject of the remainder of the text!:

- Unlike on social media, old forum conversations can last in perpetuity (if the forum admin allows it) because new comments (usually, depending on settings) pop threads up to the *top* of what is visible on the forum. ¶ This implies that there is far less unhealthy compulsion to "always be creating and posting new content" on forums. And, by the way, that unhealthy compulsion to "keep up" *may* be engineered *deliberately* for the sake of increased data harvesting (hence monetization). Own your own attention! ¶ The simplicity of the traditional forum system also makes it much harder for the visibility and prominence of things to be manipulated for shady reasons. Social media in contrast is constantly selling out to the highest bidder!
- Related to the previous point, but different: There is much less of a sense of time pressure to reply on forums. Though forum users have egos (like in all communities) their identities are less tied in and hence there is less of a compulsion for grandstanding for attention. Literally anybody on a forum can get their thread popped to the top (called "bumping a thread") if they later want to pick the thread (pun intended) of the conversation back up. (If they

do so excessively though, the forum admins can (and may) ban them, but as long as users behave themselves and act gracefully that seldom seems to occur.)

- Traditional forums often gush with charming [retro computing](#) appeal. Many even feature their own sets of forum-based emojis that in some cases even predate standardized [unicode emojis](#)! The interface is often sleek too.
- Forums frequently give users fairly strong fine-grained customization controls for how the forum will appear to them and what their own profile and posts will look like. There is less of a sense of having things forced upon oneself and more of a sense of mutuality. Forum UIs feel less condescending.
- The tendency of forums to specialize on a specific set of one or more categories of subject matter means that a higher proportion and density of relevant users will [congregate](#) on the site. Thus, the percentage of users that stumble into conversations they don't really understand and then misbehave in it seems a fair bit lower. [Mob rule](#) is weaker on forums. (It's like the reverse effect of when a [subreddit](#) gets big, is another way of putting it.)
- [The software used to create traditional forums](#) (sometimes still called [bulletin board software](#)) is often open and freely available to other webmasters to install and use on their own sites. Hence, if you ever want to create your own *truly independent* forum (not merely a different subforum still living under the same administrative rulers – quite unlike Reddit) then you can, although thereafter getting internet traffic is likely the hard part.
- There are various software packages available to help create automated defenses against bots posting. Though some systems may be vulnerable, there are workarounds and trickery an admin can employ to thwart attacks. The simplest is to force all posts to be manually approved, but [honey pots](#) (for detecting bots) and *reverse* honey pots (for detecting humans) are probably the most effective and (if elegant enough) can still be simple and effective.
- The decentralized nature of the multitude of forums that could be brought into existence across the web greatly increases the diversity of the underlying software (unlike [centralized](#) systems on a few sites) and hence greatly decreases the vulnerability of society to systematic attack or manipulation by a hostile power. Diversity also encourages variety and fun!
- Most traditional forums are less prone to arbitrary censorship than social media sites are (unlike [ostensibly](#) "democratic" voting-based social media "forums" such as Reddit). This may be surprising, since traditional forum admins and mods basically have full control, but you may be surprised how much less motivation people have to be oppressive when there is no point system and no direct tie to their identity. Egos can run high, as with anywhere, but free speech seems reliably more amply available on forums than on social media in my experience. ¶ Most significantly, free speech without *visibility* and *reach* is essentially not even real free speech. Social media sites are far more capricious and corrupt about what does or doesn't receive any *real* visibility. It seems likely to me that that is by design: a way to disempower the public.

- If open source software is used, then forums are not [walled gardens](#) and are more likely to be able to be preserved for the future in the event that a site may have to shut down. A script to download the forum's content is likely to be easier to create for a [FOSS](#) forum than for a shadowy private social media. In other words, both [archival](#) and [managerial](#) work is made easier. Furthermore, it shows greater [empathy](#) for the time and effort that users have invested.
- The reduced [grouphink](#) that is a characteristic of traditional forums relative to social media not only helps protect the future outcomes of humanity as a whole (by reducing the chances and prevalence of [mob rule](#) in society, etc) but helps nurture distinctive and authentic patterns of thought in one's mind, increasing the chances that one's life will make a difference. **All things are connected. All of life is like a chain of falling dominoes.**

Alas, I *do* have a few social media accounts (e.g. [Mastodon](#) and [Bluesky](#)) but I have difficulty feeling inclined to use them much since my interest in them is purely in the hopes of having more of a voice for reaching, supporting, and being supported by others with similar interests. Social media makes me feel anxious and morose, even just from *anticipating* using it, whereas traditional forums rarely ever do.

That speaks volumes of the true nature of each (social media vs forums)! I think it is important to *listen* to such instincts. Interacting with others on the internet should not feel so fretful and should not tug at one's "identity" so much. Forums only *modestly* do those things, whereas social media does so *severely* and seems to "*demand*" (by design) an unhealthy level of "engagement" from users to be granted sufficient visibility to reach the audience. Forums don't have that problem as much.

Therefore, how about bringing more of a sense of *real* (not unhealthily engineered) community back to your web activity by joining and/or creating one or more forums?

Even if forum activity is (currently) less, at least the way it *feels* is far better!

Here is a [link to the big Wikipedia list of forum software again](#).

Consider making or joining one! Freedom must be protected or it risks being lost.

The following ones seem to be the most actively maintained ones (as of 2025-02-01):

- [phpBB](#)
- [FUDforum](#)
- [Discourse](#)

Tell me if you decide to join or make one! (My [contact info](#) is on my site, below.)

Fair warning: the biggest problem with forums is lower activity levels currently.

Be ready for that: to trade "convenience" for freedom. Alas, change may *require* it.

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