f i ® s t m ¤ ñ d @ ¥
PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

Inventing the dark Web: Criminalization of privacy and the apocalyptic turn in the imaginary of the Web
by Thais Sardá, Simone Natale, and John Downey

Abstract

This paper examines how the deep Web, *i.e.*, Web sites that are not indexed and thus are not accessible through Web search engines, was described and represented in British newspapers. Through an extensive content analysis conducted on 833 articles about the deep Web published between 2001 and 2017 by six British newspapers, we demonstrate that these technologies were predominantly associated with crime, crypto markets and immoral content, while positive uses of this technology, such as protecting privacy and freedom of speech, were largely disregarded. The consistent association by the British press between the deep Web and criminal and antisocial behaviors is exemplary of a recent "apocalyptic turn" in the imaginary of the Web, whereby Web-related technologies are perceived and portrayed in more negative ways within the public sphere. We argue that the use of such negative concepts, definitions and associations engender distrust about uses of the deep Web, propagating user stereotypes that reflect what we argue to be an overall criminalization of privacy.

Contents

Introduction

Since the early years of the Internet, metaphors such as the highway, the frontier, the library, the archive and the cloud have been mobilized by various social actors to convey what the Web is and what it could be used for (Wyatt, 2021). Rather than being "mere" concepts, each of these metaphors alluded to specific dimensions of the Internet — the frontier, for instance, suggested its libertarian potential, while the idea of the highway implied that the Web was a suitable object for state intervention. Research has also shown that such discursive constructions have significant impact on public debates and ultimately on the governance of the Internet (Crawford, 2007; Mansell, 2012). Following the rhetorical inventions and diffusions of concepts and metaphors related to the Web helps shed light on wider shifts in representations and perceptions of online media that inform wider governmental approaches (*e.g.*, HM Government, 2019).

Research in Internet studies and digital media studies has increasingly acknowledged the importance of metaphors and other forms of representation (Mager and Katzenbach, 2021)