

Meet the Renegades of the [Intellectual Dark](#) [Web](#)

An alliance of heretics is making an end run around the mainstream conversation. Should we be listening?



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By **Bari Weiss** Photographs by **Damon Winter**

Here are some things that you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the [Intellectual Dark Web](#): There are fundamental biological differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we're in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered "dark."

I was meeting with Sam Harris, a neuroscientist; Eric Weinstein, a mathematician and managing director of Thiel Capital; the commentator and comedian Dave Rubin; and their spouses in a Los Angeles restaurant to talk about how they were turned into heretics. A decade ago, they argued, when Donald Trump was still hosting "The Apprentice," none of these observations would have been considered taboo.

Today, people like them who dare venture into this "There Be Dragons" territory on the intellectual map have met with outrage and derision — even, or perhaps especially, from people who pride themselves on openness.

It's a pattern that has become common in our new era of That Which Cannot Be Said. And it is the reason the Intellectual Dark Web, a term coined half-jokingly by Mr. Weinstein, came to exist.

What is the I.D.W. and who is a member of it? It's hard to explain,

which is both its beauty and its danger.

Most simply, it is a collection of iconoclastic thinkers, academic renegades and media personalities who are having a rolling conversation — on podcasts, YouTube and Twitter, and in sold-out auditoriums — that sound unlike anything else happening, at least publicly, in the culture right now. Feeling largely locked out of legacy outlets, they are rapidly building their own mass media channels.

The closest thing to a phone book for the I.D.W. is a [sleek website](#) that lists the dramatis personae of the network, including Mr. Harris; Mr. Weinstein and his brother and sister-in-law, the evolutionary biologists Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying; [Jordan Peterson](#), the psychologist and best-selling author; the conservative commentators Ben Shapiro and Douglas Murray; [Maajid Nawaz](#), the former Islamist turned anti-extremist activist; and the feminists Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Christina Hoff Sommers. But in typical dark web fashion, no one knows who put the website up.

Christina Hoff Sommers Damon Winter/The New York Times

The core members have little in common politically. Bret and Eric Weinstein and Ms. Heying were Bernie Sanders supporters. Mr. Harris was an outspoken Hillary voter. Ben Shapiro is an anti-Trump conservative.

[But they all share three distinct qualities.](#) First, they are willing to disagree ferociously, but talk civilly, about nearly every meaningful subject: religion, abortion, immigration, the nature of consciousness. Second, in an age in which popular feelings about the way things ought to be often override facts about the way things actually are, each is determined to resist parroting what's politically convenient. And third, some have paid for this commitment by being purged from institutions that have become increasingly hostile to unorthodox thought — and have found receptive audiences elsewhere.

“People are starved for controversial opinions,” said Joe Rogan, an MMA color commentator and comedian who hosts one of the most popular podcasts in the country. “And they are starved for an actual conversation.”

That hunger has translated into a booming and, in many cases, profitable market. Episodes of “The Joe Rogan Experience,” which have featured many members of the I.D.W., can draw nearly as big an audience as Rachel Maddow. A recent [episode](#) featuring Bret Weinstein and Ms. Heying talking about gender, hotness, beauty and #MeToo was viewed on YouTube over a million times, even though the conversation lasted for nearly three hours.

Joe Rogan Damon Winter/The New York Times

Ben Shapiro’s podcast, which airs five days a week, gets [15 million downloads](#) a month. Sam Harris estimates that his “Waking Up” podcast gets one million listeners an episode. Dave Rubin’s YouTube show has more than 700,000 subscribers.

[Offline and in the real world](#), members of the I.D.W. are often found speaking to one another in packed venues around the globe. In July, for example, Jordan Peterson, Douglas Murray and Mr. Harris will appear together at the O2 Arena in London.

But as the members of the Intellectual Dark Web become genuinely popular, they are also coming under more scrutiny. On April 21, Kanye West crystallized this problem when he tweeted seven words that set Twitter on fire: “I love the way Candace Owens thinks.”

Candace Owens, the communications director for Turning Point USA, is a sharp, young, black conservative — a telegenic speaker with killer instincts who makes videos with titles like “How to Escape the Democrat Plantation” and “The Left Thinks Black People Are Stupid.” Mr. West’s praise for her was sandwiched inside a longer thread that referenced many of the markers of the Intellectual Dark Web, like the tyranny of thought policing and the importance of independent thinking. He was [photographed watching](#) a Jordan Peterson video.

All of a sudden, it seemed, the I.D.W. had broken through to the culture-making class, and a few in the group flirted with embracing Ms. Owens as their own.

Yet Ms. Owens is a passionate Trump supporter who has dismissed racism as a threat to black people while arguing, despite evidence to the contrary, that immigrants steal their jobs. She has also compared Jay-Z and Beyoncé [to slaves](#) for supporting the Democratic Party.

Many others in the I.D.W. were made nervous by her sudden ascendance to the limelight, seeing Ms. Owens not as a sincere intellectual but as a provocateur in the mold of Milo Yiannopoulos. For the I.D.W. to succeed, they argue, it needs to eschew those interested in violating taboo for its own sake.

“I’m really only interested in building this intellectual movement,” Eric Weinstein said. “The I.D.W. has bigger goals than anyone’s buzz or celebrity.”

And yet, when Ms. Owens and Charlie Kirk, the executive director of Turning Point USA, met last week with Mr. West at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, just outside of the frame — in fact, avoiding the photographers — was Mr. Weinstein. He attended both that meeting and a one-on-one the next day for several hours at the mogul’s request. Mr. Weinstein, who can’t name two of Mr. West’s songs, said he found the Kardashian spouse “kind and surprisingly humble despite his unpredictable public provocations.” He has also tweeted that he’s interested to see what Ms. Owens says next.

This episode was the clearest example yet of the challenge this group faces: In their eagerness to gain popular traction, are the members of the I.D.W. aligning themselves with people whose views and methods are poisonous? Could the intellectual wildness that made this alliance of heretics worth paying attention to become its undoing?



There is no direct route into the Intellectual Dark Web. But the quickest path is to demonstrate that you aren't afraid to confront your own tribe.

The metaphors for this experience vary: going through the phantom tollbooth; deviating from the narrative; falling into the rabbit hole. But almost everyone can point to a particular episode where they came in as one thing and emerged as something quite different.

A year ago, Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying were respected tenured professors at Evergreen State College, where their Occupy Wall Street-sympathetic politics were well in tune with the school's progressive ethos. Today they have left their jobs, lost many of their friends and endangered their reputations.

All this because they opposed a "Day of Absence," in which white students were asked to leave campus for the day. For questioning a

day of racial segregation cloaked in progressivism, the pair was smeared as racist. Following threats, they left town for a time with their children and ultimately resigned their jobs.

“Nobody else reacted. That’s what shocked me,” Mr. Weinstein said. “It told me that a culture that told itself it was radically open-minded was actually a culture cowed by fear.”

Sam Harris says his moment came in 2006, at a conference at the Salk Institute with Richard Dawkins, Neil deGrasse Tyson and other prominent scientists. Mr. Harris said something that he thought was obvious on its face: Not all cultures are equally conducive to human flourishing. Some are superior to others.

“Until that time I had been criticizing religion, so the people who hated what I had to say were mostly on the right,” Mr. Harris said. “This was the first time I fully understood that I had an equivalent problem with the secular left.”

After his talk, in which he disparaged the Taliban, a biologist who would go on to serve on President Barack Obama’s Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues approached him. “I remember she said: ‘That’s just your opinion. How can you say that forcing women to wear burqas is wrong?’ But to me it’s just obvious that forcing women to live their lives inside bags is wrong. I gave her another example: What if we found a culture that was ritually blinding every third child? And she actually said, ‘It would depend on why they were doing it.’” His jaw, he said, “actually fell open.”



Sam Harris Damon Winter/The New York Times

“The moral confusion that operates under the banner of ‘multiculturalism’ can blind even well-educated people to the problems of intolerance and cruelty in other communities,” Mr. Harris said. “This had never fully crystallized for me until that moment.”

Before September 2016, Jordan Peterson was an obscure psychology professor at the University of Toronto. Then he spoke out against Canada’s Bill C-16, which proposed amending the country’s human-rights act to outlaw discrimination based on gender identity and expression. He resisted on the grounds that the bill risked curtailing free speech by compelling people to use alternative gender pronouns. He made YouTube videos about it. He went on news shows to protest it. He confronted protesters calling him a bigot. When the university asked him to stop talking about it, including sending two warning letters, he refused.

While most people in the group faced down comrades on the political left, Ben Shapiro confronted the right. He left his job as editor at large of Breitbart News two years ago because he believed it had become, under Steve Bannon’s leadership, “Trump’s personal Pravda.” In short order, he became a primary target of the alt-right

and, according to the Anti-Defamation League, the No. 1 target of anti-Semitic tweets during the presidential election.

Other figures in the I.D.W., like Claire Lehmann, the founder and editor of the online magazine [Quillette](#), and Debra Soh, who has a Ph.D. in neuroscience, self-deported from the academic track, sensing that the spectrum of acceptable perspectives and even areas of research was narrowing. Dr. Soh said that she started “waking up” in the last two years of her doctorate program. “It was clear that the environment was inhospitable to conducting research,” she said. “If you produce findings that the public doesn’t like, you can lose your job.”

When she wrote an op-ed in 2015 titled “[Why Transgender Kids Should Wait to Transition](#),” citing [research](#) that found that a majority of gender dysphoric children outgrow their dysphoria, she said her colleagues warned her, “Even if you stay in academia and express this view, tenure won’t protect you.”

Nowadays Ms. Soh has a column for Playboy and picks up work as a freelance writer. But that hardly pays the bills. She’s planning to start a podcast soon and, like many members of the I.D.W., has a Patreon account where “patrons” can support her work.

These donations can add up. Mr. Rubin said his show makes at least \$30,000 a month on Patreon. And Mr. Peterson says he pulls in some \$80,000 in fan donations each month.

Mr. Peterson has endured no small amount of online hatred and some real-life physical threats: In March, during a lecture at Queen’s University in Ontario, a woman showed up with a garrote. But like many in the I.D.W., he also seems to relish the outrage he inspires.

“I’ve figured out how to monetize social justice warriors,” Mr. Peterson said in January on Joe Rogan’s podcast. On his Twitter feed, he called the writer Pankaj Mishra, who’d written an essay in The New York Review of Books attacking him, a “sanctimonious prick” and said he’d happily slap him.

And the upside to his notoriety is obvious: Mr. Peterson is now arguably the most famous public intellectual in Canada, and his

book “12 Rules for Life” is a best-seller.

The exile of Bret Weinstein and Ms. Heying from Evergreen State brought them to the attention of a national audience that might have come for the controversy but has stayed for their fascinating insights about subjects including evolution and gender. “Our friends still at Evergreen tell us that the protesters think they destroyed us,” Ms. Heying said. “But the truth is we’re now getting the chance to do something on a much larger scale than we could ever do in the classroom.”

“I’ve been at this for 25 years now, having done all the MSM shows, including Oprah, Charlie Rose, ‘The Colbert Report,’ Larry King — you name it,” Michael Shermer, the publisher of Sceptic magazine, told me. “The last couple of years I’ve shifted to doing shows hosted by Joe Rogan, Dave Rubin, Sam Harris and others. The I.D.W. is as powerful a media as any I’ve encountered.”

Mr. Shermer, a middle-aged science writer, now gets recognized on the street. On a recent bike ride in Santa Barbara, Calif., he passed a work crew and “the flag man stopped me and says: ‘Hey, you’re that skeptic guy, Shermer! I saw you on Dave Rubin and Joe Rogan!’” When he can’t watch the shows on YouTube, he listens to them as podcasts on the job. On breaks, he told Mr. Shermer, he takes notes.

“I’ve had to update Quillette’s servers three times now because it’s caved under the weight of the traffic,” Ms. Lehmann said about the publication most associated with this movement.



Michael Shermer Damon Winter/The New York Times

Yet there are pitfalls to this audience-supported model. One risk is what Eric Weinstein has called “audience capture.” Since stories about left-wing-outrage culture — the fact that the University of California, Berkeley, had to spend \$600,000 on security for Mr. Shapiro’s speech there, say — take off with their fans, members of the Intellectual Dark Web may have a hard time resisting the urge to deliver that type of story. This probably helps explain why some people in this group talk constantly about the regressive left but far less about the threat from the right.

“There are a few people in this network who have gone without saying anything critical about Trump, a person who has assaulted truth more than anyone in human history,” Mr. Harris said. “If you care about the truth, that is quite strange.”

Emphasis is one problem. Associating with genuinely bad people is another.

Go a click in one direction and the group is enhanced by intellectuals with tony affiliations like Steven Pinker at Harvard. But go a click in another and you’ll find alt-right figures like Stefan Molyneux and Milo Yiannopoulos and conspiracy theorists like

Mike Cernovich (the #PizzaGate huckster) and Alex Jones (the Sandy Hook shooting denier).

It's hard to draw boundaries around an amorphous network, especially when each person in it has a different idea of who is beyond the pale.

"I don't know that we are in the position to police it," Mr. Rubin said. "If this thing becomes something massive — a political or social movement — then maybe we'd need to have some statement of principles. For now, we're just a crew of people trying to have the kind of important conversations that the mainstream won't."

But is a statement of principles necessary to make a judgment call about people like Mr. Cernovich, Mr. Molyneux and Mr. Yiannopoulos? Mr. Rubin has hosted all three on his show. And he [appeared](#) on a typically unhinged episode of Mr. Jones's radio show, "Infowars." Mr. Rogan regularly lets Abby Martin — [a former 9/11 Truther](#) who is strangely sympathetic to the regimes in Syria and Venezuela — rant on his podcast. He also encouraged Mr. Jones to spout off about the moon landing being fake during Mr. Jones's nearly four-hour appearance on his show. When asked why he hosts people like Mr. Jones, Mr. Rogan has insisted that he's not an interviewer or a journalist. "I talk to people. And I record it. That's it," he has said.

Mr. Rubin doesn't see this is a problem. "The fact is that Jones reaches millions of people," he said. "Going on that show means I get to reach them, and I don't think anyone is a lost cause. I've gotten a slew of email from folks saying that they first heard me on Jones, but then watched a bunch of my interviews and changed some of their views."

Dave Rubin Damon Winter/The New York Times

The subject came up at that dinner in Los Angeles. Mr. Rubin, whose mentor is Larry King, insisted his job is just to let the person sitting across from him talk and let the audience decide. But with a

figure like Mr. Cernovich, who can occasionally sound reasonable, how is a viewer supposed to know better?

Of course, the whole notion of drawing lines to keep people out is exactly what inspired the Intellectual Dark Web folks in the first place. They're committed to the belief that setting up no-go zones and no-go people is inherently corrupting to free thought.

“You have to understand that the I.D.W. emerged as a response to a world where perfectly reasonable intellectuals were being regularly mislabeled by activists, institutions and mainstream journalists with every career-ending epithet from ‘Islamophobe’ to ‘Nazi,’” Eric Weinstein said. “Once I.D.W. folks saw that people like Ben Shapiro were generally smart, highly informed and often princely in difficult conversations, it’s more understandable that occasionally a few frogs got kissed here and there as some I.D.W. members went in search of other maligned princes.”

But people who pride themselves on pursuing the truth and telling it plainly should be capable of applying these labels when they're deserved. It seems to me that if you are willing to sit across from an Alex Jones or Mike Cernovich and take him seriously, there's a high probability that you're either cynical or stupid. If there's a reason for shorting the I.D.W., it's the inability of certain members to see this as a fatal error.

What's more, this frog-kissing plays perfectly into the hands of those who want to discredit the individuals in this network. In recent days, for example, Mr. Harris [has been labeled by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) as a bridge to the alt-right: “Under the guise of scientific objectivity, Harris has presented deeply flawed data to perpetuate fear of Muslims and to argue that black people are genetically inferior to whites.”

That isn't true. The group excoriated Mr. Harris, a fierce critic of the treatment of women and gays under radical Islam, for saying that “some percentage, however small” of Muslim immigrants are radicalized. He has also estimated that some 20 percent of Muslims worldwide are Islamists or jihadis. But he has never said that this should make people fear all Muslims. He has defended the work of the social scientist Charles Murray, who argues that genetic differences may explain differences in average IQ across racial

groups — while insisting that this does not make one group inferior to another.

But this kind of falsehood is much easier to spread when other figures in the I.D.W. are promiscuous about whom they'll associate with. When Mr. West tweeted his praise for Ms. Owens, the responses of the people in the network reflected each person's attitude toward this problem. Dave Rubin took to Twitter to defend Ms. Owens and called Mr. West's tweet a "game changer." Jordan Peterson went on "Fox and Friends" to discuss it. Bret Weinstein subtweeted his criticism of these choices: "Smart, skeptical people are often surprisingly susceptible to being conned if a ruse is tailored to their prejudices." His brother was convinced that Mr. West was playing an elaborate [game of chess](#). Ms. Heying and Mr. Harris ignored the whole thing. Ben Shapiro mostly laughed it off.

Mr. West is a self-obsessed rabble-rouser who [brags](#) about not reading books. But whether or not one approves of the superstar's newest intellectual bauble, it is hard to deny that he has consistently been three steps ahead of the zeitgeist.

So when he tweets "only freethinkers" and "It's no more barring people because they have different ideas," he is picking up on a real phenomenon: that the boundaries of public discourse have become so proscribed as to make impossible frank discussions of anything remotely controversial.

"So many of our institutions have been overtaken by schools of thought, which are inherently a dead end," Bret Weinstein said. "The I.D.W. is the unschooling movement."

Am I a member of this movement? A few months ago, someone suggested on Twitter that I should join this club I'd never heard of. I looked into it. Like many in this group, I am a classical liberal who has run afoul of the left, often for voicing my convictions and sometimes simply by accident. This has won me praise from libertarians and conservatives. And having been attacked by the left, I know I run the risk of focusing inordinately on its excesses — and providing succor to some people whom I deeply oppose.

I get the appeal of the I.D.W. I share the belief that our institutional gatekeepers need to crack the gates open much more. I don't,

however, want to live in a culture where there are no gatekeepers at all. Given how influential this group is becoming, I can't be alone in hoping the I.D.W. finds a way to eschew the cranks, grifters and bigots and sticks to the truth-seeking.

"Some say the I.D.W. is dangerous," Ms. Heying said. "But the only way you can construe a group of intellectuals talking to each other as dangerous is if you are scared of what they might discover."