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Why the disappearance of digital third spaces matters

Spaces that still exist, like Reddit or Discord, feel different now. They can still function as third spaces, but with caveats. Servers fracture, communities migrate, and conversations are increasingly shaped by platform rules, monetisation tools, moderation pressures, and censorship.

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For much of the early internet, online forums, chat rooms, fan sites, and message boards functioned as third spaces – places that weren't home or work, but where people gathered, lingered, and formed community. They were messy, niche, and wonderfully human. You logged on after school, wandered into forums, chat rooms, fandom spaces, or niche blogs, and stayed because you wanted to. Today, many of those spaces have faded, fragmented, or been absorbed into corporate platforms that prize engagement metrics over genuine connection.

In 2024, Pew Research Center examined samples of webpages from 2013 through 2023 and found that about 25 percent of all pages sampled are no longer accessible as of late 2023. That figure rises when you look at older snapshots – roughly 38 percent of pages from 2013 have gone missing, compared with only about eight percent of pages from 2023 that are now unreachable. While this pattern of digital decay isn't unnatural, the rapid erosion of digital third spaces isn't just a nostalgic concern; it reshapes how we relate to one another, how we build relationships online, and even what "community" means in a highly commercialised internet.

One major reason digital third spaces are disappearing is platformisation and monetisation. The internet is no longer made up of small, semi-independent communities. Instead, it's dominated by a handful of massive platforms – think Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube – that prioritise scale, profit, and data extraction. Algorithms have replaced chronological feeds, siloing users into hyper-specific bubbles. Metrics replaced conversation. Likes, shares, follower counts, and engagement rates turned social interaction into a measurable competition. Posting stopped being casual and started feeling strategic. Even personal expression started feeling stressful.

In contrast, older internet spaces ran on a different logic. You could disappear for weeks and return. You could lurk, post badly, change your mind, or reinvent yourself. Many of these spaces were

anonymous or pseudonymous, which meant identity was flexible and low-stakes.

Maintaining these spaces took time, moderation, and often unpaid labour. As corporate platforms grew, smaller communities struggled to survive. Hosting costs rose. Moderators burnt out. Search engines began favouring big sites over independent ones. As a result, many older digital third spaces were acquired by bigger companies and stripped of their authenticity, shut down, over-moderated, or hollowed out. Slowly, the digital commons shrank.

Spaces that still exist, like Reddit or Discord, feel different now. They can still function as third spaces, but with caveats. Servers fracture, communities migrate, and conversations are increasingly shaped by platform rules, monetisation tools, moderation pressures, and censorship.

While moderation is essential for safety, scale often forces platforms to rely on automated systems and blanket rules. These systems struggle with context, cultural nuance, and good-faith conflict. Smaller communities once relied on people who knew the group, its history, and its values for moderation. As platforms grew, this became unsustainable, leading either to over policing or neglect. In both cases, users disengage.

Another problem is the collapse of boundaries. In the past, your online third space wasn't necessarily connected to your personal life. Today, everything feels searchable, screenshot-able, and permanent.

This creates a culture of self censorship. People think twice before speaking freely, vulnerability feels dangerous, and people feel pressured to curate their identities. Ironically, a hyper-connected internet has made many users feel more isolated. When every interaction is potentially public or monetised, casual connection starts to disappear.

Digital third spaces mattered, and still do, because they gave young people room to grow. They were places to try out ideas, discover interests, and meet people outside your immediate social circle. Without them, social life becomes split between private group chats and

highly public platforms. Younger users, having grown up within platformised ecosystems, are often acutely aware of surveillance, algorithmic manipulation, and burnout. Many seek semi-private or ephemeral spaces as a response. Yet these alternatives remain fragile, constantly threatened by platform shutdowns or commercialisation.

Mental health is part of the equation, too. Constant performance and comparison can intensify anxiety and burnout. When you can't just "log on and chill", the internet no longer feels like an escape from these pressures but an extension of them.

The disappearance of digital third spaces raises a fundamental question: what do we want the internet to be for? If every space is optimised for profit, visibility, or efficiency, there is little room left for social life that is slow, uneven, and unproductive. Third spaces matter precisely because they allow people to exist without being optimised.

Reimagining digital third spaces does not necessarily mean returning to a nostalgic past. It means recognising that community requires certain structural conditions: persistence, accessibility, shared governance, and freedom from constant monetisation. It also means valuing smallness, friction, and care – qualities that run counter to the dominant logic of platform capitalism.

Ultimately, the disappearance of digital third spaces is not inevitable. It is the result of design choices, economic incentives, and cultural priorities. If the internet is to remain a place for genuine social connection, those priorities may need to change. Otherwise, we risk losing not just platforms, but the quiet, sustaining spaces where people once gathered simply to be together.

Reference:

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Learning how to write fiction as an adult

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Most people who write fiction often begin their literary endeavours relatively early in life, when adopting new hobbies is easier, adult responsibilities are minimal, and both the mind and body are still developing. In adulthood, however, writing creatively can be more challenging, especially if one has not written in a long time, and even more so without prior experience in creative writing. Learning how to write fiction as an adult can feel like quite a leap. Nonetheless, with the right approach, anyone can pick up this hobby even as an adult.

Unlearning "business" writing

For most people, a large fraction of the writing they do include writing emails, memos, and reports. These are concise, functional, and devoid of any emotion. In professional writing, complete clarity is of utmost importance. In contrast, fiction has room for a bit of ambiguity, which enriches subtext and opens up space for the reader's interpretation.

Thus, the first step to writing good fiction is to stop summarising facts and start writing more descriptively, using the "show, don't tell" rule.

The "Taste vs. Skill" gap

Popularised by radio producer Ira Glass, this concept suggests that for adult novice writers, the greatest obstacle is rarely a lack of ideas, but rather a crisis of confidence. With years of exposure to quality literature and the work of seasoned writers, adults often develop a strong sense of what excellent prose sounds like.

When their own writing fails to meet these subconsciously high standards, the resulting gap can make their work feel amateurish, leading to frustration. This frustration, in turn, causes many aspiring writers to abandon the craft prematurely. The solution is a shift in mindset, and embracing the "Shitty First Draft" – a concept explored by author Anne Lamott, allowing room for imperfect work and more practice.

Managing time

Learning how to write is a slow process. Managing time to write regularly while balancing all other commitments can sometimes feel overwhelming. But instead of waiting for a muse, or a free weekend that never comes, practicing how to write for 10 or 20 minutes a day could prove to be effective. You can also write during commutes, breaks, or early mornings. The important thing is to consistently hone your craft.

Reading

The next time you read something, it might help to notice how the author uses language to evoke certain emotions, how the pacing changes, and how the dialogues are formatted. It might slow down your reading and take a bit more effort than just reading for pleasure, but it is one of the ways you can significantly improve your writing.

As an adult, you bring richer life experiences and a deeper understanding of emotions and ideas to your writing, which can strengthen your fiction. Writing well requires attention to both craft and feeling: technique gives structure, while emotional insight gives the work depth.

There is also a quiet joy in being a beginner and gradually noticing improvements. Writing, like any other skill, can be learned and refined. So, just because you did not pick up writing as a child, doesn't mean you can't start now.



Understanding psychological reactance

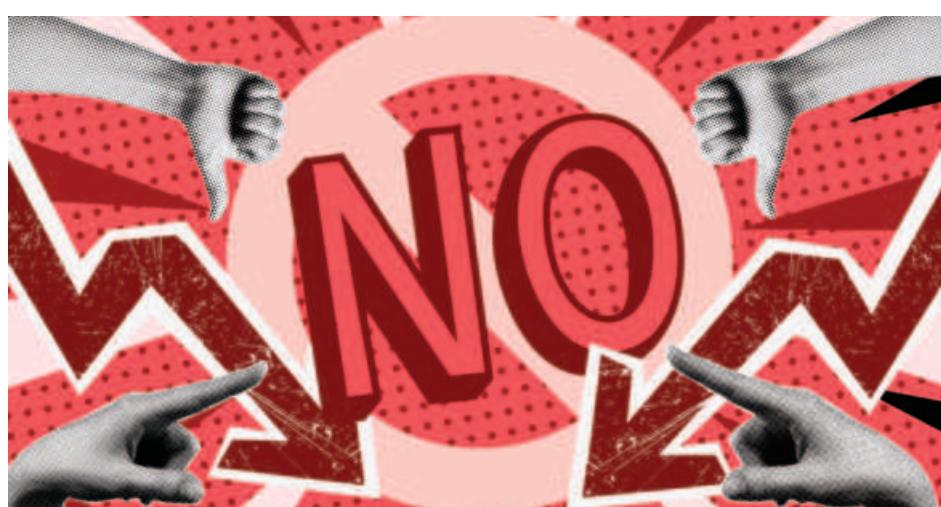


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

in ways opposite to those recommended or secretly grumbling to ourselves and agreeing anyway, albeit with great resentment.

Reactance may be an attempt to avoid losing options; nonetheless, there are occasions when we have no other choice. This is well illustrated by an instance where, after a particularly bad day, I once watched a grown adult curse out the GPS for suggesting a left turn to avoid traffic. They did not make that left turn and so remained stuck in traffic for

the next hour. I think the fact that the GPS continued to have many more opinions did not help, as, according to The Decision Lab, the larger the number of freedoms restricted, the more reactance experienced.

How to deal with psychological reactance as a leader

Unfortunately for those in authoritative positions, the easiest way to get someone to do something is to make them want to do it, and so, even if they get everything else

right, psychological reactance is likely to be their one weakness. However, there are some tactics one can follow to minimise provoking reactance significantly.

Rephrasing our instructions in a way that allows people to have a sense of control, perhaps by including options and alternatives, is often recommended. For example, when telling your teammate that their choice of orange marker will most definitely clash with the pink poster paper, you can present them with a choice between purple and dark blue. Similarly, one may choose to encourage collaboration, where you might try to appeal to your teammate by choosing the colour of the marker together. Parents can participate in similar strategies to give their children more autonomy over what they do.

How to navigate psychological reactance as a teammate

Despite society encouraging obedience to authority in almost every facet of life, people remain stubbornly resistant. When one has identified that their constitutional right to personal liberty is not being threatened when asked to go to sleep at a reasonable hour and that their protests in this scenario are unreasonable, they can try to deal with the unpleasant feeling in a responsible way.

According to Psychology Today, the best way to manage the feeling, while keeping

our reactions in check, is simply reminding ourselves that by agreeing to act in the ways advised, we are not being controlled or patronised. Besides that, acknowledging that sometimes not choosing to do something simply because someone else told us to do it can be quite counterproductive – especially if the advice is ultimately beneficial to us.

Reactance is such a fundamentally human experience that it defines our most turbulent foundational years, that is, our adolescence, and is the psychological phenomenon behind the main conflict points in almost all the stories about teenage rebellion.

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