

WEEK 02 / 14

Early Internet History: From Usenet to Something Awful

How an unmoderated digital commons degrades — and why 2007 became ground zero.

Economics Concept: **Tragedy of the Commons & Quality Dilution**

CORE CONCEPT

The Tragedy of the Digital Commons

- Usenet (1982) was an open, unmoderated commons — anyone could post to any newsgroup at zero cost of entry.
- When access to a shared resource is unrestricted, individual incentives degrade it for everyone: more posters, lower average quality.
- Long-time users called this "**Eternal September**" — the month new arrivals never stopped flooding in and diluting group norms.



MODEL: UNRESTRICTED ACCESS → QUALITY COLLAPSE

INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE

A commons only stays valuable if someone bears the cost of keeping others out. On Usenet, no one did.

HISTORICAL ORIGIN

Something Awful, April 2007

- Forum user OhSNAP!Tray, frustrated with repetitive, low-value threads, coins the term "**shitposting**" to describe the flood.
- The word names a phenomenon Usenet had already been living with for two decades — it just needed a label.
- The label spreads to Reddit and 4chan, and a subculture finally gets its own vocabulary.

THE POWER OF NAMING

Once a behavior has a name, it can be deliberately produced — not just tolerated.



FORMAT ANCESTOR

YTMND (2004): The First Loop

- You're The Man Now Dog: one image, one zoom, one looping audio clip, published on a single page.
- No editing skill required — the entire "production" is one image and one sound file.
- The structural ancestor of every short, looping, low-effort video format this course studies.



PROTOTYPE: IMAGE + LOOP = CONTENT

TAKEAWAY OF THE WEEK

Unmoderated Commons **Don't Stay Nice**

Every community this course studies inherits Usenet's founding problem: quality decays without a gatekeeper. Next week, we watch an entire country get cut off from one.

NEXT WEEK → ANONYMOUS BOARDS & THE GREAT TURKISH 4CHAN BAN