In late July, President Trump aimed his Twitter account at the platform itself: “Twitter ‘SHADOW BANNING’ prominent Republicans,” he wrote. “Not good.” The post followed reports suggesting that Twitter had limited some conservatives’ visibility on parts of its site in subtle ways — by, for example, downplaying them in certain search results. The quotation marks and all-caps styling signaled that the term, according to Trump house style, was both new and especially sinister.

Headlines and news segments about “shadow banning” were, around this time, battling for space with stories about another unfamiliar term: “QAnon.” This is the name for a vast conspiracy theory that suggests, among many other things, that Trump was recruited by the military to overthrow generations of rule by a cabal of evildoers; that the Mueller investigation is actually a cover for an effort to expose a Democrat-run global pedophile ring; and that these narratives will converge in the arrival of “the storm,” during which the president will consolidate power and send his foes to Guantánamo Bay.

These terms are best understood as signs of our time: paranoid, weaponized, online. But they also share roots in the web as it existed before the rise and dominance of mainstream social media. “Shadow banning” was popularized on a niche-but-influential forum called Something Awful. Its administrators and moderators, dealing with often-unruly and trollish users, were breezy authoritarian, removing, punishing and humiliating users for violating the rules, or simply because they wanted to. Shadow bans were intentionally cruel: They meant that users could continue to post, but that their messages were invisible to everyone but them; gradually, they would realize that they had been exiled. This suited portions of the site, where antisocial behavior was all but explicitly encouraged. But Something Awful prided itself, and still does, on never being quite as bad as its more anarchistic contemporary, 4chan — which would become the birthplace of QAnon, when someone using the handle “Q” began posting cryptic missives about Washington politics.

The internet of old — composed largely of thousands of scattered communities populated by people who shared interests, identities, causes or hatreds — has been mostly paved over by the social-media

Twitter wants to be a gigantic forum for everyone and everything. But a forum at this scale has perverse and dangerous consequences.
Gigantic social-media platforms are uniquely vulnerable to attack from those with a desire to disrupt them.

John Herrman is a technology reporter for The Times.

Giants. In this new landscape, basic intelligible concepts of community become alien: The member becomes the user; the peer becomes the follower; and the ban becomes not exile, but death. It is not surprising that the angriest spirits of the old web occasionally manifest in the new one. But what’s striking is how effectively they can haunt it, and how ill-equipped it is to deal with them.

From the 1980s until the smartphone boom, attempts at creating online spaces for entertainment, deliberation or conflict were defined as much by who wasn’t there as by who was. Most people simply weren’t online, and among those who were, even fewer had the time or desire to participate vigorously in online communities. Broadly speaking, though, this relationship to online communities — you find them, rather than the other way around — placed a great deal of power in the hands of users who were able and willing to take part. Even the largest web forums felt vaguely subcultural, existing as they did in relative isolation from countless other communities online. They had their own rules, their own ways of enforcing them and their own reasons for being: to argue about music, to commiserate about an illness. Each forum was ultimately run by whoever owned it and moderated largely by volunteers.

One way of thinking about the current coalition of social-media platforms is as forums created with the presumption that everyone could, and should, eventually join them. Twitter has described itself at various times as a tool, a service and a community. Unlike a smaller community, to which admission is a choice that reflects your interests or needs or personality, Twitter has no shared identity beyond “people who want to use Twitter to post.” Its group organizational tools — hashtags — are bare-bones and ephemeral. It does not, and cannot, foster a positive normative consensus about who or what Twitter is for.

Creating the conditions for healthy deliberation has never been easy for online communities of any size. But in Twitter’s organizational model, this prospect is immensely unlikely: It is a crowd of people (including the president) with megaphones, convening as temporary audiences and then dispersing. That Twitter discourages the creation of lasting structures within itself is reflected in the unsanctioned organizational concepts most often used to describe what happens on Twitter: the mob; the fandom; the meme. These are hardly communities;
they behave more like movements — sometimes very powerful ones — but they are always expected to dissolve.

On Twitter, it may seem that you are talking to friends or peers, and that the space is controlled or even safe. But it’s not: It’s shared with and extremely vulnerable to those with a desire to disrupt or terrorize it. In order to function, Twitter must make its users feel at home in the most public space devised by humankind. The platform can’t easily say what smaller intentional forums can: “We don’t want this here; you’re violating the spirit of our community; go away.” It is too big, with too many people present for too many different reasons, to be a site for any one sort of conversation. It exercises absolute authority over its service, of course, but must pretend to do so carefully, sparingly and only when forced to.

Much of a small community’s advantage comes from its comprehensibility. You know why you’re there; you know why other people are there. You are neither asked nor most likely tempted to ascribe genuine democratic or civic concepts to a discussion forum attached to, say, a fitness site. This is a stark contrast with Twitter. Earlier this month, Jack Dorsey, the company’s chief executive, in response to other platforms’ decision to ban Alex Jones of Infowars, defended his decision to leave Jones’s Twitter alone. “Accounts like Jones’s can often sensationalize issues and spread unsubstantiated rumors, so it’s critical journalists document, validate and refute such information directly so people can form their own opinions,” he wrote. “This is what serves the public conversation best.” This is why Twitter exists, apparently: to host a discursive death match.

It is not a given that a centrally run social platform can nurture healthy communities, even if vibrant, powerful and empowering communities have, against the odds, found one another there. (Reddit, which is a centralized social platform with forumlike communities within it, does not so much reconcile these eras as combine their flaws: It’s not where QAnon started, but it is where the conspiracy theory found a larger, more organized audience.) The current state of affairs — the worst of the old combined with the worst of the new — only breeds cynicism. To alienated users, a tyrannical ideologue and his “shadow bans” is a more appealing, or at least comprehensible, story than the alternative: practiced, selective indifference, guided by growth and advertising. Similarly, QAnon, the grotesque power fantasy that casts a substantial part of the country as traitorous members of a cult of sex criminals, serves a secondary unmet desire. The theory provides a temporary community that’s impervious to outside forces, because it assumes everything outside it is evil. And the faithful, for once, know exactly why they’re online.

You are neither asked nor most likely tempted to ascribe genuine democratic or civic concepts to a discussion forum attached to, say, a fitness site.

Poem Selected by Rita Dove

Paul Celan’s harrowing Holocaust incantation, “Death Fugue,” is the apparent inspiration for this poem by Marilyn Chin, a withering takedown of our so-called global diplomacy. The immigrant’s dream of a better life, “free and lush,” deteriorates as she is swept up into a vicious cycle of ethnic and gender bias. Storybook rhymes turn sinister, and ancient totems are buried under the unrelenting cadence of a New World tarantella — xenophobia and nationalism exacting their murderous toll while “the bamboo grows and grows.”

By Marilyn Chin

Bamboo, the Dance

How free and lush the bamboo grows, the bamboo grows and grows
Shoots and morasses, fillies and lassies and shreds and beds and rows
O phloem and pistil, nodes and ovules
The bamboo grows and grows
Her release, her joy, her oil, her toil, her moxie, her terror, her swirl
Dig deeper into soil, deeper into her soul, what do you find in my girl
Thrash of black hair and silken snare, face in the bottom of the world
Bound by ankles, poor deer, poor sow, O delicate hooves and fascicles
Dead doe, dead doe, dead doe
Wrist’s together, searing red tethers, blood draining from her soles
O choir, O psalm, O soaring fearsome tabernacle
The bamboo grows, the bamboo grows and grows
Through antlers and eyeholes, O sweet soul, O sweet, sweet soul

Thin green tails, purple entrails, the bamboo grows and grows
She flailed and wailed through flimsy veils, through bones and hissing marrow
Nobody to hear her, but wind and chaff, a gasp, then letting go
They loved her, then stoned her, buried her near her ancestors
My mother, my sister, my soul

Shimmering mesh, a brocade sash, hanging on a distant oracle
Springboks dance on shallow mounds, echoes, echoes, echoes

The New York Times Magazine

Ilona Szwarc

“The Super Bowl of Beekeeping.”
Page 40

Ilona Szwarc is a Polish-born photographer and artist based in Los Angeles who has been awarded the Richard Benson Prize for excellence in photography and the Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture. Most recently, she has exhibited at Regen Projects and Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles. For this week’s article, she spent several days with the bee farmers who help pollinate California’s almond crops. “As I was photographing, bees would crawl up to my lens and around my fingers and face,” Szwarc says. “It turns out they are attracted to CO₂ and the color black. Counterintuitively, I had to hold my breath instead of breathing deeply if I wanted to calm the swarm around me.”

Contributors

Nicholas Confessore

“Big Tech’s War on Privacy.”
Page 28

Nicholas Confessore is a political investigative reporter for The Times and a writer at large for the magazine. He last wrote about the changing rules of influence in Trump’s Washington.

John Herrman

On Technology.
Page 12

John Herrman is a media and technology reporter for The Times and a regular contributor to the magazine. In 2016 he was one of the first three recipients of the David Carr Fellowship.

Jaime Lowe

“The Super Bowl of Beekeeping.”
Page 40

Jaime Lowe is a frequent contributor to the magazine and the author of “Mental!” She previously wrote a feature about the incarcerated women who fight California wildfires.

David Quammen

“Scrambling Darwin.”
Page 34

David Quammen is an author and a three-time recipient of the National Magazine Award. This article is an excerpt from his book “The Tangled Tree,” which was just published.

Lisa Sanders

Diagnosis.
Page 16

Lisa Sanders, M.D., is an internist and teaches at the Yale School of Medicine. She writes the magazine’s Diagnosis column, which is being developed into a Netflix documentary series.

Zachary Siegel

First Words.
Page 9

Zachary Siegel is a freelance journalist in Chicago. He covers public health and criminal justice and co-hosts a podcast about drugs called Narcotica. This is his first article for the magazine.

James D. Walsh

Letter of Recommendation.
Page 22

James D. Walsh is a member of the editorial staff at New York magazine and the author of “Playing Against the House.”