Lurking

How a Person Became a User

by Joanne McNeil
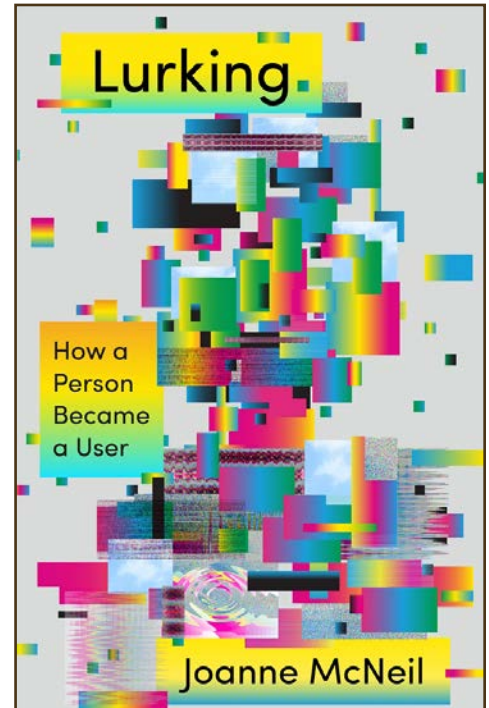
In a shockingly short amount of time, the internet has bound people around the world together and torn us apart and changed not just the way we communicate but who we are and who we can be. It has created a new, unprecedented cultural space that we are all a part of—even if we don't participate, that is how we participate—but by which we're continually surprised, betrayed, enriched, befuddled. We have churned through platforms and technologies and in turn been churned by them. And yet, the internet is us and always has been.

In *Lurking*, Joanne McNeil digs deep and identifies the primary (if sometimes contradictory) concerns of people online: searching, safety, privacy, identity, community, anonymity, and visibility. She charts what it is that brought people online and what keeps us here even as the social equations of digital life—what we're made to trade, knowingly or otherwise, for the benefits of the internet— have shifted radically beneath us. It is a story we are accustomed to hearing as tales of entrepreneurs and visionaries and dynamic and powerful corporations, but there is a more profound, intimate story that hasn't yet been told.

Long one of the most incisive, ferociously intelligent, and widely respected cultural critics online, McNeil here establishes a singular vision of who we are now, tells the stories of how we became us, and helps us start to figure out what we do now.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *Lurking*, Joanne McNeil offers a history of the internet, exploring how people use it, what they want from it, and how it might be improved. She writes, "People used to talk about the internet as a place. The information superhighway. A frontier. The internet was something to get on" (17). Think about these metaphors and how they might apply to your own experience of the internet. How would you describe your own internet use? How has your relationship with the internet changed since you first became a user?

2. Throughout *Lurking*, McNeil examines the implications of the power imbalances between tech companies like Google, "a private company with a bottom line" (33), and their many users. Regarding Google, she asks, "How is it possible to operate a private company at this size ethically?" (23). Discuss the ethical problems that result from the size and money-making motives of Google and similar companies. What effect have these power imbalances had on your own life and internet use?

3. Recalling her time on Friendster, an early social network, McNeil writes: "As more people joined, it felt like a high-concept exercise in what a person's life even means to another person, how close to or how far from one another everyone is, as I could observe which friends overlapped in which communities, or who knew someone from my past" (85). How does this characterization of Friendster differ from how you might describe the social media platforms you use today? What are the benefits of the observations McNeil describes here? What are the drawbacks?

4. McNeil details how "Facebook provided a map of human relationships that no one asked for but that many now believe they could never live without" (220). Consider your own use—or avoidance—of Facebook in particular. How has the mapping that McNeil describes affected your relationships? Has this effect evolved?

5. Instagram differs from other social networks, McNeil contends, in that "[on] Instagram, the product, the content, and the information to share comes from a user's own life—there's nothing more personal" (136). Discuss your use of Instagram, or lack thereof. How do you feel about sharing personal content on the platform?

6. Regarding Twitter, McNeil asserts that "[public] scrutiny might have resulted in stronger moderation and anti-harassment measures, implemented early enough to be effective" (131). How does she account for Twitter's failure to implement these safeguards? If you use Twitter, how does their absence affect your experience?

7. McNeil argues that "there was never an opportunity to be a faceless, genderless, raceless internet user, because the public imagination of online identity has always defaulted to standards that white men had constructed" (72). Think about the roles that race, gender, and other facets of who you are have played in your internet use. When have you been prompted to consider your identity in the context of the internet?

8. "In Silicon Valley, hiring humans (other than triathlete-mathletes) is always less preferable than programming machines to do something," McNeil writes (25). How might the identities of big tech companies' employees influence their work? What makes machines a more attractive option than human employees for these companies?

9. McNeil points out that as the rise of the iPhone led more demographics to enter the fold of social media and smartphone use, media coverage of the internet retained a "focus on personal responsibility [that]

resulted in a vacuum of pointed tech criticism about surveillance, data mining, online harassment, and corporate power" (116). Years later, rather than holding those at fault for the internet's problems to account, media critics have "fostered an endless ping-pong of surface changes and tactics" (246). Consider the criticism and news coverage of the internet that you've read. Does it align with McNeil's description of the media's approach to tech? How would you like to see that coverage change?

10. McNeil describes her teenage relationship to the internet: "The internet was an alternate vector for expression, at a time when I felt I had no connection to the physical world, just a body in space with little to say" (61). She says with the friends she made online, "I had control over my identity and I could choose what aspects of it I revealed to others; the intensely confessional and honest encounters spiraled out from there" (62-63). Consider how you present yourself online. Has the nature of what you reveal to others—strangers or friends—changed over the course of your internet use? How might your habits be different if you were older or younger?

11. McNeil pins down "a self-defeating but sometimes totally accurate way of thinking about privacy: no one actually cares what you are doing in public…. This construct fails where power imbalances exist" (97). What role do privacy concerns play in your decisions about what you share online?

12. McNeil describes how the effects of online harassment bleed into the real world. For users in early online communities, she says, "the pain of online harassment was frustrating, leaving users with inchoate torment, because the internet was thought of as a playground noosphere and not real life" (53). Do you think of the internet as being part of "real life?" What impact does this thinking have on your views regarding online harassment?

13. In response to widespread online harassment, trolling, and other harmful or abusive behaviors, McNeil calls for a conversation about "redemption and forgiveness," arguing that "any restorative justice needs to start with the victims—what are their needs and what does safety look like to them?" (184). Think about the social media platforms and internet communities of which you are a member. What might safety look like for someone who has been subjected to harassment or trolling there?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Joanne McNeil was the inaugural winner of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation's Arts Writing Award for an emerging writer. She has been a resident at Eyebeam, a Logan Nonfiction Program fellow, and an instructor at the School for Poetic Computation. *Lurking* is her first book.

Guide written by Michelle Waters