



INTRODUCTION

“How do you see the Internet?”

Over the past two years, I’ve asked a lot of people this question. It’s a question often met with confusion or requests for clarification. Do I mean “What do you *think* about the Internet, like in the grand scheme of things?” or “How do you think the Internet *works*?” or “How do you *access* the Internet?” Really, I’m asking all three.

Sometimes it helps to start with that last question: how people access or use the Internet. For most people, the answer is that they see the Internet through screens—browsers and apps on laptops and phones. Sometimes people will point at a router, vaguely understanding that’s the device their Wi-Fi connection comes from.

Once I understand the specifics of how someone interfaces with the Internet, I’ll ask the second question: “How do you think the Internet works, and how do you visualize that process?” At this, answers vary, though they tend to follow three common trajectories, each one aligning well to certain tropes seen in stock photos and illustrations sometimes used to describe “the Internet.”

“I have no idea. Maybe black magic.”



This answer sometimes involves hand-waving and anxious, slightly apologetic faces. To be fair, there are a lot of bad stock images out there that support that answer—which is to say, they make the mechanisms of the Internet appear impossibly complicated and opaque. You may have seen these sorts of images. Sometimes it’s a man at the peak of an over-Photoshopped mountain, his arms reaching for a giant laptop in the sky from which fluffy white clouds emerge. Other times, it’s a different man (always men in these weird dreamscapes, usually wearing ties), hands cradling poorly rendered collages of computers and a globe floating in some ethereal mist that could be data traveling across the network—or could be fairies, no one really knows.

Ironically, some of these baffling images emerge from attempts to make the Internet seem *less* complicated, through metaphors like “the cloud.” Metaphors can be useful teaching tools, but when *all* that people know about the Internet are metaphors, it tends to make their understanding of it more clouded, not less.

“It’s a network of computers talking to computers.”

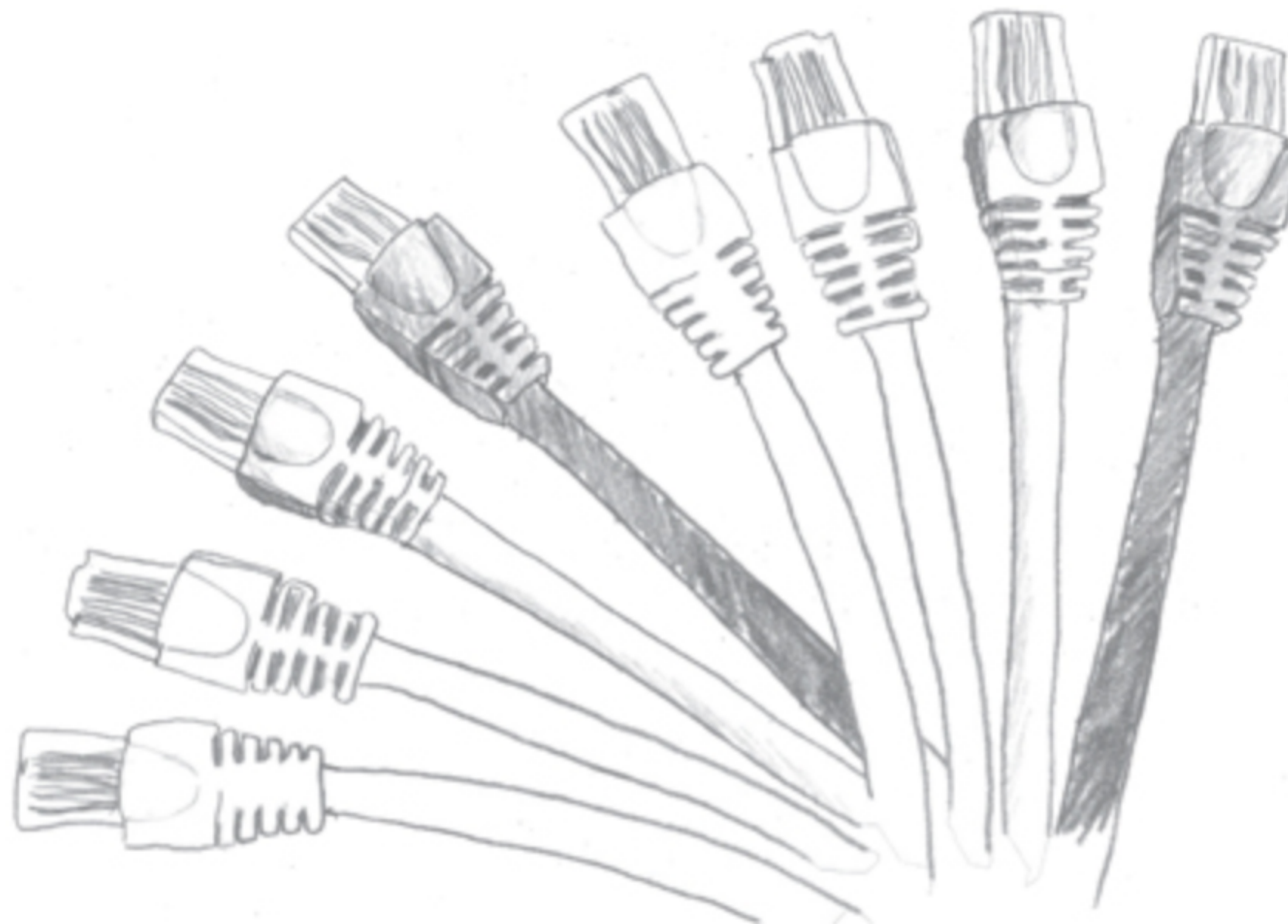


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This is the most pragmatic answer, and it’s the one accompanied by stock images of network diagrams—icons of computers in dots, connected to one another with lines in an ever-expanding web. And it’s slightly more accurate, but it’s still an abstraction. It doesn’t really convey the scale of the network, the volume of objects that are part of it, or the places where nodes in that network end up being concentrated. In reality, the Internet isn’t an evenly distributed utility—nodes aren’t all perfectly connected, and the quality of a connection can vary widely. While abstract network diagrams are good for getting a general idea of how it’s supposed to work, they sweep up the particularities of geography and history that play a large role in shaping the Internet.

“There’s a whole bunch of ... computers somewhere doing ... stuff. Cyber stuff.”

We're getting warmer with this answer. There's actual reference to *objects*. We don't necessarily understand what they're *doing*, and maybe don't understand how they work together, but they *exist*. The visuals associated with this answer tend to be extreme close-ups of cables and Ethernet ports or wide shots of dark hallways of server racks, illuminated only by the softly pulsing blue LED lights of machines. Rooms of wall-to-wall screens with incomprehensible diagrams or CCTV footage streaming across them.



There's an implicit assumption in these images that the Internet's physical spaces are privileged spaces, behind locked doors with retina scanners and high gates. These security procedures make sense, but the theater and optics that surround them encourage an assumption that only an elite few are clever and privileged enough to understand how the Internet actually works—and if you aren't one of those people, being curious about how the Internet works is circumspect.

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The thing is, all of these answers—that the Internet is made up of objects, that it's a network, that it's weird black magic—are kind of correct. The magic part isn't necessarily how the machines work but rather the weird, amazing, terrifying, and wonderful things that people figure out how to do with the network.

These notions of how the Internet works, and the images that illustrate them, are how I saw the Internet two years ago when I started asking people that annoying question. I didn't really know what the Internet looked like, but I was pretty sure it didn't look like any of the images I saw paired with headlines about Edward Snowden or Facebook or Google. I wanted to know about the stuff that made the Internet work, where it lived, and how I could find it. There are some excellent public resources on this topic, but for some questions I really wanted to talk to someone on the inside. However, with a few exceptions, almost everyone “official” I tried to talk to brushed me off. The rejections didn't read as a matter of security or of protecting the networks but more like a failed transaction. I wasn't specialized, I wasn't already an expert, I wasn't well connected, and I couldn't get anyone good press with my work. I was just some curious artist, so nobody really had any interest in answering my questions. I had to find the Internet on my own, starting where I already was: New York City, a weird set of islands off the coast of America.