

The Atlantic

Trump's Incoherent Ideas About 'the Cyber'

Wait, what?



Donald Trump reacts during the first debate with Hillary Clinton.

Lucas Jackson / Reuters

ADRIENNE LAFRANCE

SEP 27, 2016

TECHNOLOGY



TEXT SIZE



The way people talk about the internet is, as with most things, imprecise. They say “literally” when they mean “figuratively.” They say “the internet” when they mean “the web.” (The internet is the structural underpinning of the web, which is what you see when you’re clicking around online.)

And yet we’ve come a long way since the days of “surfing the net,” “the information superhighway,” and “cyberspace.” Most of us, anyway. Politicians, in

particular, still have a knack for evoking 1990s web lingo when they find themselves commenting on modern information systems. (The recent [congressional record is full](#) of this kind of thing.)

“Cyberspace,” in particular, is an old-school favorite that people just can’t seem to shake—in large part because of the rise of concerns about “cybersecurity,” which has kept the “cyber” prefix in use. In the mid 1990s, the term “cyber” by itself was often a shorthand for “cybersex,” or explicit online chatting. The term “cyberspace,” though, is usually traced back to William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, which describes a network of connected computers that creates a mass “consensual hallucination.” Before that, “cyber” goes back to [Norbert Wiener’s epic writings](#) on [cybernetics](#) in the 1940s.

At the presidential debate Monday night, Donald Trump drew attention to “the cyber,” as he put it, in an incoherent response to this question, posed by the moderator Lester Holt: “Our institutions are under cyber attack, and our secrets are being stolen. So my question is, who's behind it? And how do we fight it?” Here’s part of what Trump said:

As far as the cyber, I agree to parts of what Secretary Clinton said. We should be better than anybody else, and perhaps we’re not. I don’t think anybody knows that it was Russia that broke into the DNC. She’s saying Russia, Russia, Russia—I don’t, maybe it was. I mean, it could be Russia, but it could also be China. It could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, okay?

...

We came in with the Internet. We came up with the Internet. And I think Secretary Clinton and myself would agree very much, when you look at what ISIS is doing with the Internet, they’re beating us at our own game. ISIS.

So we had to get very, very tough on cyber and cyber warfare. It is a huge problem. I have a son—he’s 10 years old. He has computers. He is

so good with these computers. It's unbelievable. The security aspect of cyber is very, very tough. And maybe, it's hardly doable. But I will say, we are not doing the job we should be doing. But that's true throughout our whole governmental society. We have so many things that we have to do better, Lester. And certainly cyber is one of them.

To which many viewers responded with some variation of—um, *what?*

“The true loser of the presidential debate? The English language,” *The New York Daily News* [declared](#), calling Trump's shorthand for cybersecurity “bizarre” and comparing him to “an out-of-touch comment that would come from your tech-illiterate grandpa.” *Rolling Stone* deemed his remarks on “the cyber” one of the major “[WTF moments](#)” from the debate.

Of course, Trump's own preferred *cyberplatform* is Twitter, which is where much of the wryest debate commentary took place.



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4:17 AM - 27 Sep 2016

  61  101

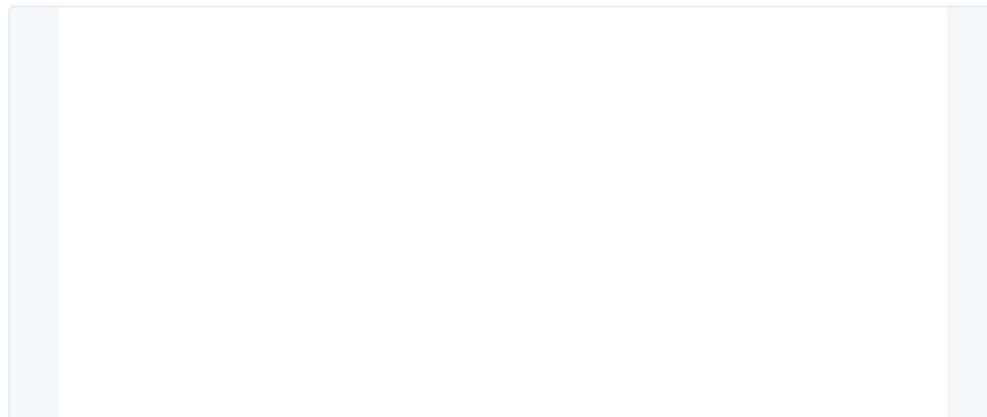


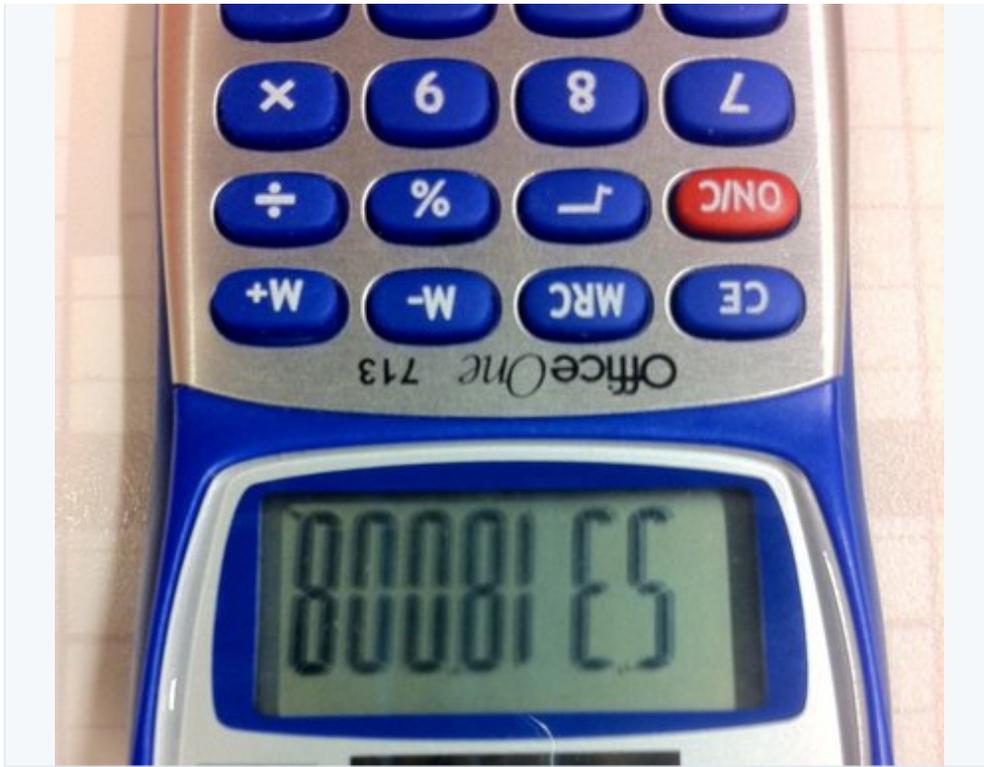
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I, too, am concerned about The Cyber.
4:11 AM - 27 Sep 2016

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Photo of the cyber security that impressed Trump

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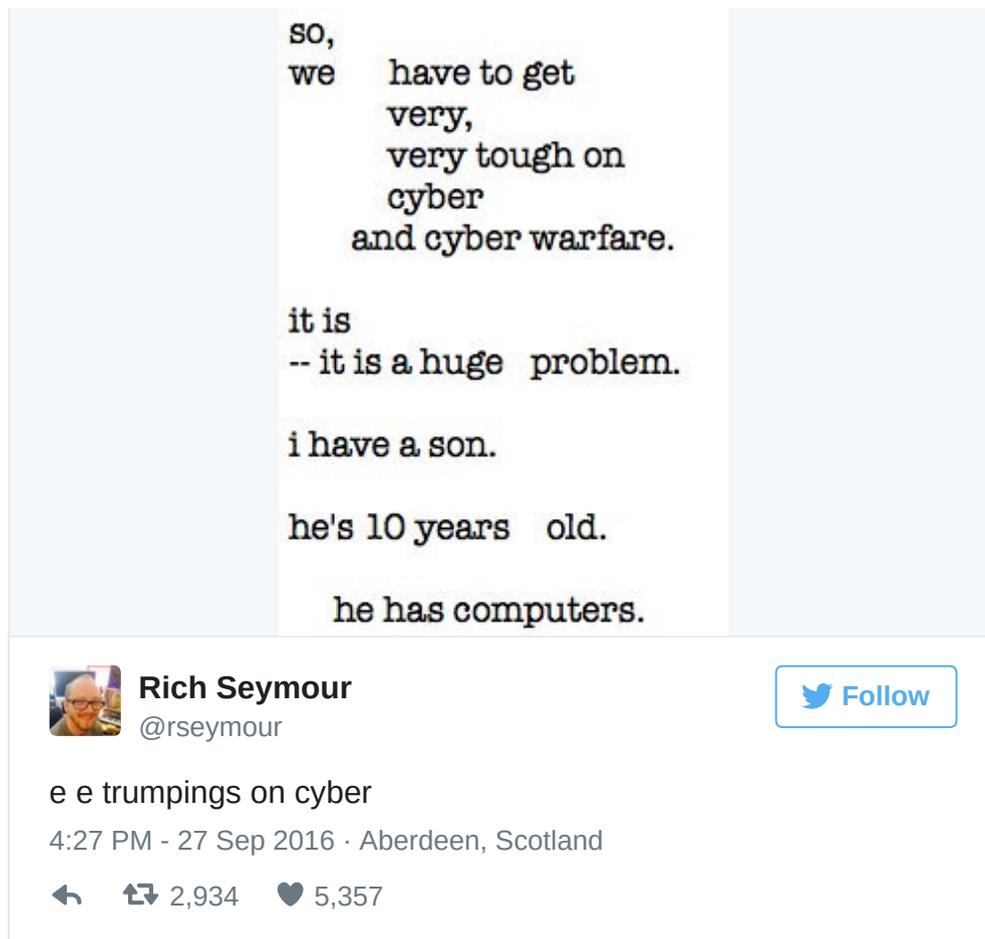
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The cyber is really humming this morning

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  71  177



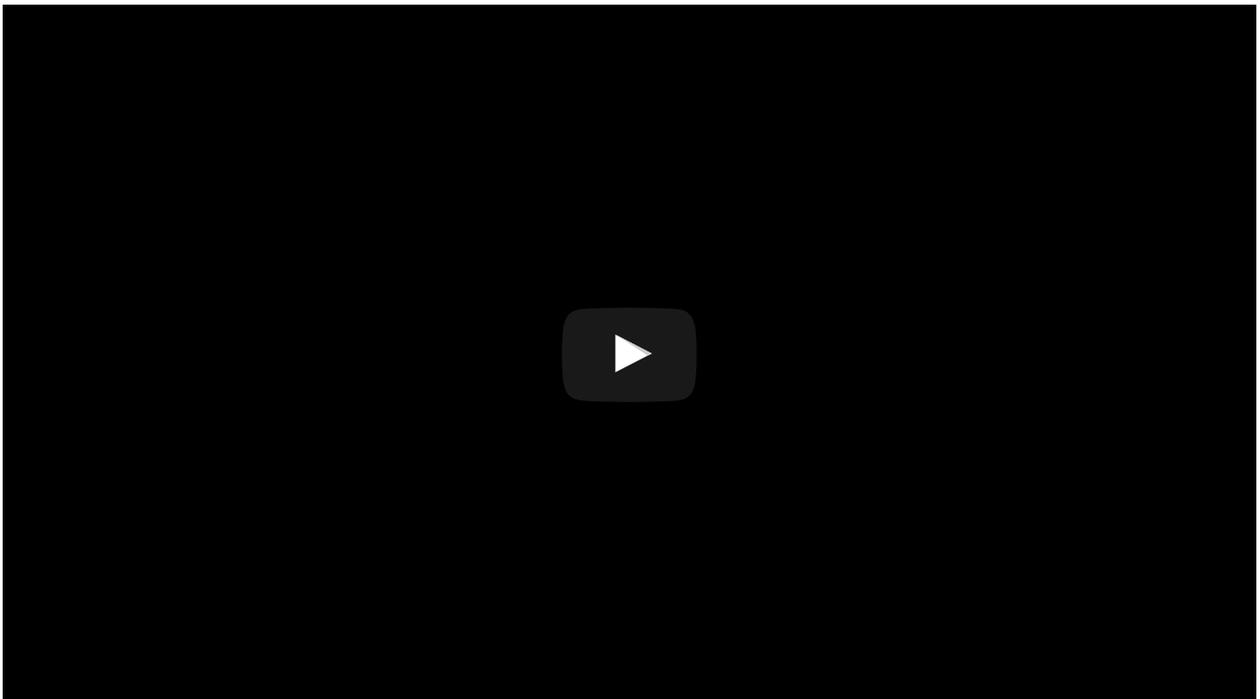
Monday night wasn't the first time Trump has talked about "the cyber." It's a term he's used repeatedly, in fact.





And though Trump's wording elicited a flood of jokes, many [have argued](#) that his apparent lack of sophistication when it comes to articulating security threats isn't funny—but alarming. (Especially when you consider it in contrast to Hillary Clinton's comments on the topic, which she seems to understand with a much greater degree of sophistication.)

That won't stop “the cyber” from becoming a catchphrase, however. After all, George W. Bush is the one who gave us “the internets.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ADRIENNE LAFRANCE is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, where she covers technology. She was previously an investigative reporter for [Honolulu Civil Beat](#), [Nieman Journalism Lab](#), and [WBUR](#).

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