

# **4chan, Anonymity, and the Internet Alt-Right**

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### 4chan, Anonymity, and the Internet Alt-Right

With the election of Donald Trump and the subsequent hard shift of both the Executive and Legislative Branches further to the political right came an increased fixation on the alt-right movement, a loosely organized far-right ideology so named by Richard Spencer, National Policy Institute founder and notable white nationalist<sup>1</sup>. The alt-right movement, characterized as an alternative to mainstream conservatism, combines hard-line conservative social values with radical white nationalism. In trying to define this decentralized new movement, it is as important to understand the central, prominent supporters of the alt-right, such as Breitbart News and Spencer's National Policy Institute, as it is to understand the more loosely-defined alt-right communities that congregate and radicalize through the connective power of the Internet – many of which were never intended to be far-right communities in the first place. One particular and significant example is image-hosting and discussion board 4chan, whose user identity philosophy created a unique Internet ecosystem that fomented its own deep-frame ideology characterized by racism, anti-Semitism and far-right rhetoric – an ecosystem that has become both a component and tool of the broader alt-right movement.

Christopher Poole (widely known by his admin username “moot”) created 4chan in 2003 at fifteen years old, wanting to create an English-based equivalent to Japanese anime image boards. Poole believed that anonymity “allows users to reveal themselves in a ‘completely unvarnished, unfiltered, raw way’.”<sup>2</sup> Contribution to 4chan doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Is the Alt-Right For Real?”

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Ha, “4chan founder: Zuckerberg is ‘totally wrong’ about online identity”

require a username or any sort of account: users simply verify that they're not advertising bots through a captcha and submit to the site on a post-by-post basis, all under the username "Anonymous". In every thread and post on 4chan, almost every 4chan user (with the exception of administrators and moderators) contributes under the "Anonymous" username, demonstrating Poole's commitment to anonymity as a necessary condition for building community online.

Poole's belief in anonymity stands in stark contrast to other philosophies of online identity, most prominent of which being Mark Zuckerberg's strong advocacy of radical transparency – Anthony Ha explains that Poole argued "that when everyone knows everything you've done online, you're a lot more worried about screwing up, and you're less willing to experiment... 'The cost of failure is really high when you're contributing as yourself,' Poole said."<sup>3</sup> Poole believes that freeing users from the strictures of their offline, real identity permits them to create more freely and express their true opinions, while also creating a truly democratic, egalitarian community. While Poole sold the site and stepped down as administrator in January 2015, the site still operates according to his strict doctrine of anonymity.

In many ways, Poole's philosophy has been realized through 4chan's runaway success and superior position in the greater Internet culture. 4chan now stands as the 465<sup>th</sup> most popular website globally and the 180<sup>th</sup> in the United States, with over 22 million unique visitors per month. In 2009, Poole was voted "the most influential person in the world" in a contested open Internet poll conducted by *Time Magazine*. Many of 4chan's shared images and inside jokes (broadly and colloquially called "memes") have

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<sup>3</sup> Ha

become wildly viral phenomena even outside of the Internet, such as Lolcats, “Rickrolling” (Rick Astley performed at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade due to the renewed popularity of his 1987 hit), Advice Animals, and Pepe the Frog. Part of the site’s popularity stems from the fact that, according to Ha, “is that content becomes more important than the creator.”<sup>4</sup> Thus these incredibly popular memes are only attributable to 4chan itself, rather than any single user, which serves to solidify 4chan’s stranglehold on greater Internet culture.

4chan’s doctrine of anonymity has proven to be an immense double-edged sword: the website’s popularity and democratized creativity is subverted by the virulent, bigoted, and far-right reactionary rhetoric that is seemingly omnipresent in the site’s community and discourse. The site’s popular /pol/ board (self-titled as “Politically Incorrect”) serves as the epicenter for 4chan’s racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and homophobic ideology, ranging from comically-offensive hate speech intended to get a rise out of liberals and political moderates (known on the site as “trolling”) to articulate and idealistic support for xenophobic and fascist policies and political groups. A single visit to the message board will showcase a variety of alt-right invective: in one thread, a user calmly and rationally explained that “asians are proof that the problems faced by minorities in America are the fault of their own culture”, while in another thread a user described non-white people as “flawed prototypes” and that “white people are the final product”. This type of hate speech is not limited to the /pol/ board, however, and is widespread across the entire site: even in /fa/, 4chan’s fashion-oriented board, a user claimed “I would kill myself if my child was mixed race”.

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<sup>4</sup> Ha

Far-right “4channers” also share site-specific codified practices such as bracketing the names of Jewish people they mention in sets of three parentheses to denote their Jewish faith and possible involvement in a Jewish world conspiracy, as well as racist versions of otherwise innocent 4chan memes – especially Pepe the Frog, a cartoon frog so widely used and perverted by far-right users both on 4chan and Twitter that it is now designated as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League<sup>5</sup>. The term “cuck”, used pejoratively to describe a weak man that symbolically or literally allows other men (usually characterized as African-American or as Muslim immigrants in 4chan rhetoric) to have sex with his wife or girlfriend, was first popularized and utilized in a political context on /pol/.

4chan serves as proof that an anonymous platform can serve as both a hotbed of democratized creativity and a breeding ground for alt-right rhetoric. For the first time, users are allowed to express their true – and sometimes repressed – selves in a larger community without fear of retribution. As Langdon Winner posits in “Mythinformation”, “many people who have grown cynical or discouraged about other aspects of social life are completely enthralled by the supposed redemptive qualities of computers and telecommunications.”<sup>6</sup> For many users, 4chan’s anonymous and egalitarian platform is an escape from the whining disapproval of their peers and liberal policies they see as unpatriotic or prioritizing marginalized and minority groups above others. The great majority of far-right 4channers also speak from obvious positions of privilege, validating Winner’s claim that “those best situated to take advantage of the power of a new

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<sup>5</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “Pepe the Frog”

<sup>6</sup> Langdon Winner, “Mythinformation” p. 592

technology are often those previously well situated by dint of wealth, social standing, and institutional position. Thus, if there is to be a computer revolution, the best guess is that it will have a distinctly conservative character.”<sup>7</sup> While Winner didn’t prophesize the proliferation of online digital communities like 4chan and instead referred to technology’s effect on real-life human communities and society, he was very much accurate in his assessment of real-world ideology reflected in technology and digital communities. This intersection of both cynicism towards progressive social values and a conservative bent among these “computer enthusiasts”, in combination with 4chan’s anonymity, created the perfect ecosystem in which to develop a homegrown far-right ideological community.

While 4chan’s foundational conditions as a community and ideological ecosystem may be interestingly new, the alt-right rhetoric expounded there is not. Most of the political positions held on the site are fairly boilerplate far-right and white nationalist rhetoric: African-Americans are seen as violent, “degenerate” criminals that are “inferior to white people” and Jewish people are believed to be in control of “(((american))) television” and liberal media outlets like the “Jewington Post”. While 4chan’s mobilization and propagation of these views is entirely novel, the views themselves are not. The existence of these far-right positions beyond 4chan serves to attract more users from other reactionary corners of the Internet, as well as allying 4chan to other far-right and white nationalist groups and aligning the site as part of the broader alt-right movement.

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<sup>7</sup> Winner p. 593

/Pol/ and 4chan's alt-right userbase may have remained contained and isolated in the safe space of 4chan's anonymous user interface were it not for "trolling", 4chan's means of spreading their rhetoric and exerting their influence outside of 4chan and throughout other online communities. Trolling as an act has a broader scope than just the political aspect on 4chan, simply defined as any mean-spirited prank or polemic rhetoric intended to elicit an angry or emotional response from the recipient, but is given a more political meaning through /pol/ and its involvement with the Alt-Right – as Aja Romano writes, "Before the alt-right movement became more widely known for neo-Nazism and white supremacy, its members were frequently described as internet trolls."<sup>8</sup> Political trolling can be as simple as a /pol/ user expressing their controversial or bigoted views in a more liberal space online and finding amusement in the ensuing anger, or it can be outright harassment of public figures. In June of 2016, The New York Times Washington deputy editor Jonathan Weisman quit Twitter after receiving "a barrage of anti-Semitic messages"<sup>9</sup>, and "Ghostbusters" comedienne Leslie Jones openly decried the racist harassment directed towards her on Twitter, an event that led to Twitter banning Breitbart News tech editor Milo Yiannapolous for his involvement in the harassment.

The line between mean-spirit prank and harassing hate speech is blurred by 4chan's alt-right rhetoric, which claims that trolling is simply an expression of 4channers' free speech – Yiannapolous, a prominent and public figure of the alt-right movement, claims that "trolling is a direct response to being told by the left what not to say and what

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<sup>8</sup> Aja Romano, "How the alt-right uses internet trolling to confuse you into dismissing its ideology", Vox

<sup>9</sup> Joel Stein, "How Trolls are Ruining the Internet", Time Magazine

kinds of video games not to play.”<sup>10</sup> To the far-right /pol/ ideologues spewing anti-Semitic and racist invective at celebrities on Twitter or Facebook, sometimes with telltale Pepe the Frog avatars or using anti-Semitic triple parentheses, trolling is simply a necessary backlash against liberal “politically correct” speech policing that is present on these platforms but not on 4chan itself. Trolling also serves to hide the true idealistic foundations of 4chan’s alt-right ideology by framing their harassment as a mean-spirited prank, according to Romano, making it “extremely difficult for the average person to parse alt-right trolling from ‘sincere’ alt-right messaging.”<sup>11</sup> The relative anonymity of the greater social media landscape allows alt-right 4chan trolls to spread their rhetoric beyond the safe space of 4chan, while hiding from consequences or retribution through mitigating claims of free speech.

With the rise of the greater alt-right movement to political prominence and the appointment of the Trump administration, 4chan’s rhetoric (and the site itself) are more politically relevant and mobilized than ever before. In October of 2016, Milo Yiannapolous contact current 4chan owner Hiroyuki Nishimura intending to purchase the site, explaining that “As a free-speech fundamentalist and a student of Internet culture, I appreciate how fragile and precious the 4chan ecosystem is and how much it gives to the wider Internet.”<sup>12</sup> Yiannapolous also has had direct contact with the site, and is in good standing with the community due to the similarity of his and the site’s views: in the aftermath of the #GamerGate games journalism scandal (manufactured by the alt-right movement), Milo posted on 4chan (with photographic proof of identity)

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<sup>10</sup> Stein

<sup>11</sup> Romano

<sup>12</sup> Lucas Nolan, “Hollywood Reporter: ‘Milo Yiannapolous Eyeing Bid for 4chan’”



thanking them for their involvement in GamerGate, to which the first reply in the thread thanked Milo “for saving video games”.

Milo’s interest in 4chan and his position as one of the senior editors at Breitbart News are not coincidental. With the appointment of former Breitbart executive chair Steve Bannon to the position of Chief Strategist under the Trump administration, the alt-right movement has gained serious political recognition as an ideological force, and far-right Internet ecosystems like 4chan are now invaluable assets for building a decentralized community of like-minded alt-right ideologues. 4chan’s bigoted userbase, once derided as angry basement dwellers and annoying trolls, are now seen as invaluable assets for forming a radical movement in the online public sphere. If prominent and powerful alt-right thought leaders like Yiannapolous and Bannon learn to better utilize 4chan as a means of spreading radical rhetoric and political chaos, the site could potentially become a formidable political weapon that could have a serious effect on mainstream American politics and social discourse.

## Sources:

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## Addendum: Primary 4chan Sources

File: [balloon pepe.png](#) (39 KB, 200x200)



Why did God create brown people? Anonymous (ID: [hZH2Eir](#)) 12/09/16(Fri)13:08:46 No.102201812 >>102202011

>> Anonymous (ID: [LW+oCvRU](#)) 12/09/16(Fri)13:10:55 No.102202011 >>102202321

>>102201812 (OP)  
to be inferior to white people.

>> Anonymous (ID: [hZH2Eir](#)) 12/09/16(Fri)13:13:47 No.102202321 >>102204064

>>102202011  
What would a world filled with White people on all continents look like?

>> Anonymous (ID: [u5PGb0EL](#)) 12/09/16(Fri)13:30:29 No.102204064 >>102202321

>>102202321  
Heaven.

>> Anonymous (ID: [UTiUCxb8](#)) 12/09/16(Fri)13:42:48 No.102205431

Flawed prototypes.

White people are the final product.

1468208423724.jpg (131 KB, 600x1172) google iqdb wait



Anonymous (ID: [v+E10IO3](#)) 11/25/16(Fri)14:10:19 No.100148150 [1] [Reply] >>100153482 >>100153592

Why do liberals hate Asians? :(

+ 17 posts and 1 image reply omitted.

Anonymous (ID: [2XzvHu3q](#)) 11/25/16(Fri)15:10:23 No.100153482

>>100148150 (OP)

Asians are proof that the problems minorities face in America are the fault of their culture. Asians face/have faced discrimination and poor treatment similar to blacks, and many of them got to America almost penniless.

However, most Asian cultures value hard work and sucking it up, so they almost always excel in spite of adversity.

This is direct proof that "muh poor oppressed xyz minority group can't get ahead because the white man won't give them enough welfare" is a pile of bullshit.

blacklivesmatter1[1].jpg (52 KB, 624x351) google iqdb Upload to imgur View same on 4plebs /pol/



Anonymous (ID: [FBT8k1eN](#)) 12/25/15(Fri)10:28:40 No.59235586 [1] [Reply]

Why don't white people protest when an injustice is committed because of their skin?

Don't they have any solidarity or passion?

Anonymous (ID: [UyAxDrKd](#)) 12/25/15(Fri)10:30:05 No.59235663

White people tend to know that actions have consequences

[Return] [Catalog] [Bottom] [Update] [Auto]

File: [8375893275893275893275937\(...\).jpg](#) (357 KB, 1280x960)



Anonymous (ID: [WYvXUSX](#)) 05/30/16(Mon)16:12:28 No.75576676 >>75576820 >>75577403 >>75577859 >>75578214 >>75580230 >>75580425 >>75580427 >>75580657 >>75580732 >>75581527 >>75581963 >>75582592 >>75582874 >>75583294 >>75584124

Ooh watch out boys, the worlds most powerful military force is here!

Anonymous (ID: [YmqRC3b](#)) 05/30/16(Mon)16:13:47 No.75576820 >>75577589 >>75577884 >>75579943 >>75583793

>>75576676 (OP)  
can any of them even throw grenades?

Anonymous (ID: [0Zn9YmZ](#)) 05/30/16(Mon)16:20:13 No.75577589 >>75577781 >>75578042 >>75578053 >>75578283 >>75582983 >>75583462 >>75583642 >>75583793

>>75576820  
Probably not, but if we decided to invade your country we could just airdrop pennies to keep you distracted.

Anonymous (ID: UeooVJA) 12/09/16(Fri)12:50:00 No.102199961  
File: 1413116458750.jpg (236 KB, 891x576)



>>102199824

>That is only because she would be less desirable, and therefore have worse self esteem. Exactly.

In eastern europe girls are made humble by poverty and traditional upbringing (aka overbearing father).

In the West, white girls have the cuntiest pretty princess syndrome ever--it boggles the mind.

Anonymous (ID: ghvIN1e/) 12/09/16(Fri)13:17:23 No.102202711  
File: 1480340531960.gif (1.45 MB, 255x191)



>>102201631 (OP)

((((((((((((((((((((american)))))))))))))) television you mean. Fucking kikes...



White kid shot defends himself from nigs and spics Anonymous (ID: 6WdxdHJy) 12/09/16(Fri)12:04:45  
>>102197917 >>102198891 >>102199636 >>102199918 >>102200095 >>102200417 >>102200491 >>102200606 >>102201125 >>10220297

- >be white kid
- >be bullied at school by nigs and spics
- >report nigs to principal
- >principal does nothing because muh racism
- >bring knives to school to defend yourself
- >get shot
- >nigs and other spics praise white boy getting shot all over twitter and the internet

I wonder how people would have reacted if this was a nigger or wetback with knives. There would have been protests and this would have been all over CNN LMAO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpeaOHOQfrM> [Embed]

Anonymous (ID: O8jEBfaJ) 12/09/16(Fri)13:31:55 No.102204226

Fuck off with this degenerate nigger shit, this isn't /pol/ related at all

>>102205217  
>America is a nation of immigrants.  
This meme needs to die.

>>102202590 (OP)

Kennedy in the 60's flooded the states with Mexican immigrants in an effort to vastly increase the democratic voting base. It was largely successful for the democrat party, and a huge problem for America.

File: unnamed-1.jpg (22 KB, 385x685)



Milo Milo Yiannopoulos 09/11/14(Thu)18:19:07 No.262952626  
Thought I'd come and see what all the fuss was about! I've been chatting to some of you about #GamerGate recently. If you want to get in touch with me about this story, my email is milo@iannopoulos.net. I can't promise to reply to everyone, but I will read anything you send me. See you around!

Thank you Milo for saving video games

File: 830-11.jpg (51 KB, 830x553)



Daily dose of SWEDEN YES Anonymous (ID: MHFucid) 12/30/15(Wed)13:53:37 No.59650297  
Recently launched project in Swedish school aims to pair lonely refugees with native girls.  
http://www.itz.se/jamtland/ostersund/nytt-projekt-forskare-para-top-ensamkommande-flyktingbarn-med-enskar

Anonymous (ID: vUvzc5y) 12/30/15(Wed)13:55:13 No.59650380  
>Just kek my shit up

File: 1451511367665.jpg (616 KB, 827x1040)



More and more white Swedish women are choosing to start a family with dark men in an unprecedented effort to end racism. If current trends continue it is estimated that in 2025 over 70% of newborns in Sweden will be children of mixed racial heritage. There have been several campaigns in Swedish media stating that it's much easier for women to give birth to mixed babies, the body size at birth is much smaller than that of white babies. These campaigns seem to have been successful as there has been a dramatic increase in mixed couples during the last decade.

There is now what can only be described as a 'virgin pandemic' ravaging the white Swedish male population. Some of the more radical feminists have stated that this is a good thing. Saying it's only right that white males have to suffer too, considering their past mistreatment of both women and other races.

>>59650297 (OP)

I fucking hate this picture. It is too true to be true.

>>12025493 (OP)  
>Stylish haircut that was popular in the west ~70 years ago is popular again  
>Everyone who wears it must be a literal Nazi  
Fuck the Jewington post