

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

**THE INTERNET IS SERIOUS BUSINESS: 4CHAN'S /B/ BOARD AND THE LULZ AS
ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE INTERNET**

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Abstract

The online image and message board known as 4chan is as paradoxical as it is popular. Boasting an estimated 18 million unique monthly visitors and generating one million posts per day, the site is a locus of obscenity and bigotry, a wellspring of popular internet culture, and the birthplace of the distributed hacktivist collective known as Anonymous. In contrast to other forms of social media, no registration is required to participate on 4chan, and maintaining a persistent identity is both difficult and discouraged. Although many deride 4chan as puerile or nihilistic, I propose that a nascent form of political expression can be discerned within the site's subculture.

Specifically, I explore how participants on 4chan use carnivalesque humour and memetic communication to foster a collective identity and articulate a political orientation towards the internet—summed up by the phrase “the internet is serious business”—while remaining committed to an ethic of radical anonymity. In doing so, I recast participation on 4chan as a political act, albeit one that falls outside of a normative or rational framework.

THE INTERNET IS SERIOUS BUSINESS: 4CHAN'S /B/ BOARD AND THE LULZ AS ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE INTERNET

“Every joke is a tiny revolution. . . Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke.”

- George Orwell (1945)

1.0 Introduction

The online image and message board known as 4chan is as paradoxical as it is popular. Boasting an estimated 18 million unique monthly visitors and generating one million posts per day (Bilton, 2010; Tsotsis, 2011), the site is a locus of obscenity and bigotry, a wellspring of popular internet culture, and the birthplace of the distributed hacktivist collective known as Anonymous. In contrast to other forms of social media, no registration is required to participate on 4chan, and maintaining a persistent identity is both difficult and discouraged. Although many deride 4chan as puerile or nihilistic, I propose that a nascent form of political expression can be discerned within the site's subculture. Specifically, I explore how participants on 4chan use carnivalesque humour and memetic communication to foster a collective identity and articulate a political orientation towards the internet—summed up by the phrase “the internet is serious business”—while remaining committed to an ethic of radical anonymity. In doing so, I recast participation on 4chan as a political act, albeit one that falls outside of a normative or rational framework.

Sufficient context is necessary to understand 4chan at all, let alone the site's cultural norms and political sensibilities. Accordingly, the first section of this paper attends to the site itself, offering an extensive description of its interface, its history and its users. A discussion of methodology follows, wherein I describe the year-long ethnography of 4chan's popular /b/ board

upon which this paper is based. Having introduced the reader to 4chan, I then contextualize the site in the contemporary landscape of social media. I contrast the experience of 4chan with the rhetoric of “radical transparency” and demonstrate that opposition to online anonymity is premised upon a conception of the internet as a kind of Habermasian public sphere. I argue that such a view fails to account for the lived reality of online interaction and ignores forms of political engagement on the internet which do not conform to its deliberative model.

At this juncture, the paper turns its attention back to 4chan. I present a number of shared cultural practices—images, ritual behaviours and argot that I refer to as memes—on 4chan that became apparent during the course of my ethnography. On the surface, many of these memes seem trivial, humorous or patently offensive, and do not appear to pertain to serious political issues; however, I demonstrate how the encoding and decoding of these memes invokes a critical commentary on what the internet is and how we use it in our daily lives. Analysis of these memes reveals a counter-discourse that challenges the conflation of online and offline identity and casts the internet as a space of dissensus and play. Using Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) theory of articulation, I also address how the humor present in these memes establishes “inside and outside positions” (Gray, 2006, p. 74) and maintains a general orientation toward online issues that goes beyond private life and invokes common concerns. Lastly, the way this orientation is configured and mobilized on 4chan is elucidated through a discussion of “Operation Black Rage,” a small provocation launched by 4chan users that occurred during my ethnography.

1.1 Bakhtin and the Online Carnival

More broadly, this paper argues the case of 4chan helps illustrate the inadequacy of studies of the online public sphere that only concern themselves with rational discourses. Rather than

function solely as an extension of the offline public sphere, the mediated reality of online space gives way to potential reconfigurations of communicative action and political subjectivity. As evidenced by the discourse of 4chan users, I contend that alternative political communication on the internet can be better understood through the frame of the Bakhtinian carnival, which posits a less rational and far more chaotic, humorous and emotional space as the locus for free public interaction and political activity.

Bakhtin is likely the most-cited theorist to systematically examine the counter-hegemonic potential of laughter and obscenity within folk cultures, and his work runs like a thread through my analysis of 4chan. The site has been referred to as “a carnival of the obscene” (Schmundt, 2011), and it is relatively easy to cast 4chan as an online example of the medieval carnivals cited by Bakhtin (2009) in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin viewed these festivals as models for understanding literary and cultural practices that subverted the dominant cultural ideology through humour, obscenity, parody and inversion. During these participatory spectacles in which identities and subjectivities were blurred and obscured, the boundaries and divisions established by economic class, political hegemony and religious regulation were temporarily suspended, allowing established differences to meet and mingle in an arena of liberty and equality.

Bakhtin considers carnival to be politically efficacious primarily for two reasons. First, the unique characteristics of the carnival moment—hybridization, defilement, degradation, excess and play—function to instantiate a kind of second life for participants. Carnival “builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state” (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 88). In the Medieval context, carnival offered the masses a temporary liberation from the rigid hierarchy and toil of everyday life. However, carnival was—

and is—more than a release valve. While certainly not a complete or *strategic* political program, carnival provides a context where existing relations of power can be interrogated, challenged and revealed as contingent¹, giving rise to a “free and critical historical consciousness” (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 73). In this regard, carnival is not simply destructive; it is not solely about inverting or disrupting power relations, but also imagining new ones. Carnival “is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful sociological hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 123).

Carnival provides a good starting point for research of the internet in general, its relationship to offline society and its political potential (ex. Beng, 2011; Herold, 2011; Li, 2011; Theall, 1999). It allows researchers to treat cyberspace as a ‘place’ similar and related to, but still somewhat distinct from the offline world. This frees us from necessarily situating online events in specific offline contexts, a practice which has often failed to adequately explain online socialization and mobilization. It is also a useful vantage point for students of the burgeoning internet culture, much of which coheres around humour and memetic intertextuality (Stryker, 2011; Auerbach, 2012; Davison, 2012). Lastly, Bakhtin’s framework can help us to recast the perceived problems of the internet—its cacophony and predilection for offensive speech—not as a failure of rational deliberation, but rather as a carnivalesque success; it allows for researchers to focus less on how the internet is affecting existing political structures and relations of power and more on how, “virtual communities [can serve] as laboratories for conducting experiments in the construction of new societies and governance structures” (Ludlow, 2001, p. 11).

1 Thus, the Bakhtinian method is similar in some ways to Foucault’s genealogy. Whereas Foucault seeks to reveal the contingency of dominant norms through a critical reading of history, Bakhtin achieves a similar rendering through an analysis of language and a hermeneutic treatment of the carnival.

One of the reasons I opt to approach 4chan through a Bakhtinian analytic for two reasons. First, the terminology coined and utilized by Bakhtin assists in describing what could be termed the ‘social imaginary’ of the site and its users. Charles Taylor (2004) defines social imaginaries as “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (p. 23). It is my contention that 4chan users conceive of themselves, their behaviours, their relationship with the broader internet, and even the internet itself in a naively Bakhtinian way. Second, the concept of carnival also helps to reveal 4chan’s political potential. The radical anonymity of 4chan—itsself simply an exaggeration of the already mediated nature of online interaction—has given rise to types of speech that are characterized by “abusive language,” “insulting words or expressions” and “profanities and oaths”—all of which are patterns excluded from the official discourse (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 16). At a time when there is increasing pressure to regulate online speech (Kizza, 1998; Levmore & Nussbaum, 2010; Farall, 2011), 4chan users have found a discursive style that combines humour, satire, vulgarity and a-rationality. As Beng (2011) notes, “such a new form of speech not only exposes the absurdity and unsustainability of hierarchical control, but also effectively provides a channel for transgression and subversion for those who are at the lower end of the power structure” (p. 46).

1.2 Disclaimer

“The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact.”

- The banner of the /b/ board

“this isn't a family-friendly site. you'll see lots of nigger dick, in their asses, who look 13, racism, sexism, retard, faggots, heads split open, dead rats, and TONS of shit you won't understand... oh and here's a video of a guy being murdered with a hammer.”

- Sample post from 4chan's /b/ board

Before moving forward, I feel it necessary to state that while I am critically engaging with 4chan, I am not conducting a critique of it. As fascinating and as relevant as 4chan may be, it remains rife with all manner of deviance and prejudice. While my ethnographic experience suggests that much of the sexist, racist and homophobic language present on 4chan is not meant to be taken seriously, such discourses cannot and should not be reduced simply to offensive spectacle. There is also very real insularity and inequality on 4chan; the majority of users appear to be young, English-speaking white males, and while the barrier to participation is exceptionally low, the site's culture is far from inclusive. Finally, for every laudable protest or crowdsourced act of kindness—everything from rescuing an abused house cat to deluging an aging veteran with gifts on his birthday (Brunton, 2010; Chen, 2010a)—4chan users perpetrate numerous interventions that are far more sinister. I am dealing with a community that has been known to traffic in child pornography, once conducted an organized campaign of harassment against the family of a 13-year-old boy who committed suicide (Schwartz, 2008) and made headlines for cyber-bullying an 11-year-old girl (Chen, 2010). Elsewhere (Simcoe, 2011), I have examined the darker aspects of 4chan in more detail, but this paper does not attend to such an analysis. I do not wish to render such activities unproblematic. 4chan and Anonymous are emerging phenomena, and I encourage other scholars to approach them from a variety of angles, including those which explicitly critique some of these troubling characteristics.

2.0 4chan for Newfags

“this isn't a family-friendly site. you'll see lots of nigger dicks, girls with electronic gadgets in their asses, who look 13, racism, sexism, retards, faggots, heads split open, dead cats, and TONS of shit you won't understand... oh and here's a video of a guy being murdered with a hammer.”

- Sample post from 4chan's /b/ board

2.1 History & Demographics

To peruse the various image and message boards that comprise 4chan is to enter an insular world of anons, channers, furies, trolls and /b/tards, all of whom employ a depraved form of slang where every descriptor, ranging from the pejorative to the praiseworthy, inevitably ends in the suffix “fag.” For example, new arrivals to the site are deemed Newfags—in contrast to Oldfags—while European users are referred to as Eurofags. This crude, impenetrable nomenclature, as well as the deliberately repugnant content of the site, is perhaps one of the reasons why 4chan has resisted sustained scholarly engagement. Regardless, any study that posits 4chan as worthy of attention must attempt to pierce through the veil of absurdity and confusion that initially confronts visitors to the site.

When one arrives at 4chan’s homepage², they are greeted by the site’s logo placed above a list of some 50 separate sub-boards. The topical breadth of 4chan is substantial, and users can move from board to board, discussing everything from videogames (the /v/ board), to cars (/o/), to cooking (/ck/) and several niche categories of Japanese pornography. Activity on these boards revolves around the posting of images—one cannot start a conversation without first uploading a picture—and the subsequent threading of replies. Each board contains 15 pages, each of which displays ten threads. Thus, no more than 150 conversation threads can be active on a given board at any time. This feature, when combined with the absence of an official archive, means that 4chan is an incredibly temporal text; old content is simply pushed off the servers as new threads are posted. As Poole notes, “you [can] sit and hit refresh on your browser and continue to see new content” (in Bilton, 2010, para. 5). However, every reply to a thread bumps that thread to the top of the queue, meaning only the most engaging content persists for any length of time.

2 Figure 1

2.1 History & Demographics

The story of 4chan begins in 2003 with ‘moot,’ the online alias of 15-year-old New Yorker Christopher Poole. Desiring a forum where he could discuss his burgeoning fascination with Japanese animation, moot copied the source code from the well-known Japanese imageboard Futaba Channel, converted it into English and registered 4chan.org (Bilton, 2010). Beginning with a community of just 20 users—mostly Poole’s friends from other online forums such as Something Awful—4chan has grown to become the largest discussion board on the English-speaking internet and a significant force in online culture (Bilton, 2010; Coleman, 2008).

Although 4chan’s user base has grown significantly since its inception, its demographics have remained fairly constant. Poole (2009) is older now than when he started 4chan, but he is still representative of the site’s average user: “basically young and nerdy, and it’s mostly male, pretty much mostly just... English-speaking countries as it is an English image board, and the interests are kind of again, like, young, male, nerdy interests: anime, games, tech, TV, stuff like that.” Poole’s claim can be supported anecdotally; most of the pornographic content—both heterosexual and homosexual in nature—posted to 4chan is targeted at a male audience and users often joke that “there are no girls on the internet.” As well, threads inquiring about the age, gender and location of fellow users are fairly common. While the answers in these threads show significant variation, they suggest that young males from English-speaking countries are over-represented on the site. For example, in a particularly lengthy (over 300 replies) thread I archived, the average age of posters is 19.2 years, only 21 per cent of users identify as female, and 82 per cent claim to be from a country where the first language is English; most users profess to be from either the United States or Britain.

Politically, 4chan is more diverse, with views being expressed from across the political spectrum. Debates between socialists and libertarians are commonplace, and politicized moral issues, including religion, abortion and civil rights are frequent topics of conversation. In a similar manner to the aforementioned demographic threads, 4chan users often start discussions by collectively posting the results of a quiz offered on the site PoliticalCompass.org. Although the results do vary, users tend to land left of centre and express socially progressive leanings, a fact which seems at odds with much of the racist or sexist content posted to the site. While these results can offer an anecdotal glimpse into the political makeup of 4chan, they should not be taken as absolute. Topical threads only attract responses from users interested in the themes of those threads and may not be indicative of the site as a whole.

Lastly, although the anonymous and ephemeral nature of 4chan makes obtaining exact metrics about its users difficult, Poole (2009) has characterized the site's denizens as technologically "savvy" based on the fact that 95 per cent of the site's visitors use alternative web browsers such as Mozilla's Firefox or Google Chrome. Again, this assertion can be supported by ethnographic observation, as users often display examples of their technical prowess, be it in their ability to customize Microsoft Windows, use image editing software, or in their knowledge of the Linux operating system, which, given its one per cent global market share ("Linux," 2012) is most certainly over-represented on 4chan.

2.2 The /b/ Board

If you like the upbeat metaphor of the Internet as a hive mind, then maybe /b/ is one of the places where its unruly id resides."

"On /b/, ephemerality and deletion create a powerful - Rob Walker (2010), The New York Times

When 4chan first began, there were only two boards: /a/ for anime, and /b/ for everything else. Since the site's inception, Poole has added numerous other boards, but /b/ has long since replaced anime as 4chan's *raison d'être* and its popularity is such that people often equate 4chan solely with /b/. In a quantitative study of /b/, Bernstein et al. (2011) found the board generates approximately 35,000 threads and 400,000 comments per day—roughly the same amount of posting activity as arenas like Usenet and YouTube. The board tends to aggregate towards a unique mix of humour, pornography, offensiveness, and, at times, illegality. However, true to its 'random' status, /b/ can also be a site of heartfelt emotional exchanges, intellectual debates, empathy, sympathy, feminism, egalitarianism, justice, and creativity. Given this mix of diversity and insularity, mainstream sources have often described /b/ as "the id of the internet" (Dibbell, 2010; Walker, 2010).

Unlike other boards on 4chan, /b/ is the only forum without topical restrictions, meaning that users are free to post and discuss nearly anything. The only interdicts on /b/ concern child pornography, the posting of personal information, and calls to 'raid' or harass other websites or online communities. However, all of these rules are frequently joked about and sometimes violated by users. As well, it is on /b/ where 4chan's ephemerality is most salient; the sheer volume of traffic means most posts made to the board often disappear after only a few minutes. Bernstein et al. (2011) hypothesize that the pace and temporality of /b/ acts as both as an impetus for participation: "if /b/ users want to keep a thread from expiring within minutes, they need to keep conversation active" (p. 6), and the driving forces behind the board's creative output: "On /b/, ephemerality and deletion create a powerful selection mechanic by requiring content the

community wants to see be repeatedly reposted, and potentially remixed. We believe this is critical to the site's influence on internet culture and memes" (p. 7).

Since its inception, /b/ has garnered a reputation as a prodigious producer of popular internet culture. In the words of journalist and cyber-culture observer Julian Dibbell (2010):

The Internet at large absorbs a steady stream of catchphrases and sight gags—LOLcats, rickrolling, and other ubiquitous Internet memes that seep up from the endless, dizzying churn of /b/'s vast reservoir of inside jokes. Often intended to shock, shot through with racism, misogyny, and other qualities deliberately chosen from beyond the contemporary pale, the words and images of /b/ have become an online spectacle. (p. 82)

As Dibbell notes, the most common memes from 4chan to enter the broader web lexicon are LOLcats—pictures of cats accompanied by grammatically incorrect captions³—and 'rickrolling'—a practice of disingenuous hyperlinking which subjects an unsuspecting user to a video of Rick Astley singing his 1987 hit "Never Gonna Give You Up." However, there are numerous other examples of memes which were either birthed or popularized on 4chan and/or /b/, and during my observation period, I would often encounter content from 4chan on other popular social networking sites, including Reddit, Tumblr and Facebook.

In addition to its status as a "meme factory" (Brophy-Warren, 2008; Poole, 2009), /b/ has become the contemporary locus of the online trolling subculture. The practice of trolling emerged from antagonistic debates on early Usenet newsgroups (Tepper, 1997; Donath, 1999), and was initially a form of play predicated on identity deception:

The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns; the newsgroups members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings, and upon judging a poster a troll, make the offending poster leave the group. Their success at the former depends on how well they—and the troll—understand identity cues;

3 Figure 2

their success at the latter depends on whether the troll's enjoyment is sufficiently diminished or outweighed by the costs imposed by the group. (Donath, 1999, p. 14)

In the intervening years between the Usenet and Web 2.0, trolling has transformed from the isolated practice described by Donath into a growing internet subculture replete with its own norms, locales and cultural practices. While intra-group trolling is incredibly common on /b/—users note that trolling the board is akin to “pissing into an ocean of piss”—its users are equally infamous for bringing their brand of trolling into more mainstream corners of the web. For example, Phillips (2011) details the act of ‘RIP Trolling,’ which involves leaving offensive comments on memorial pages established on social networking sites. Thus, as Coleman (2012) notes, modern “trolls work to remind the ‘masses’ that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geek who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery” (p. 17).

The earliest incidents of crowdsourced trolling that originated from /b/—such as the infamous raid on the Habbo Hotel social network⁴—were the genesis of the Anonymous phenomenon, which, at its core, can still be understood as “a decentralized on-line community acting anonymously in a coordinated manner, usually toward a loosely self-agreed goal” (Vichot, 2009). 4chan users, under the banner of Anonymous, have also fashioned trolling into a working ethic for political protest and expression. For more on this, see Coleman's (2009 & 2011) and Underwood and Welser's (2011) accounts of Project Chanology, wherein traditional protest forms were fused with the pranks, humour and crass behaviour common to the the /b/ board.

4 A frequent target for organized raids by Anonymous is Habbo, a social networking site designed as a virtual hotel, which caters to teenage users. On July 12, 2006, 4chan users signed up to the Habbo site dressed in avatars of a black man wearing a grey suit and an Afro hairstyle and blocked entry to the pool, declaring that it was “closed due to AIDS.” They flooded the site's chat network with 4chan argot and formed swastika-like formations of avatars. The raid was reportedly inspired by an Alabama amusement park which banned a toddler affected with AIDS from using the park's swimming pool (“Habbo Hotel,” 2012).

3.0 Methodology

This paper draws on a lengthy period of observation and participation on on /b/. While my choice of observational methods is informed by the work of Christine Hine (2000), my study is relatively bounded, and thus less concerned with the “flow and connectivity” of 4chan. With only a few exceptions, the ethnographic work that went into this paper occurred either on 4chan’s /b/ board, or within the confines of certain paratext sites, most notably *Encyclopedia Dramatica*. Nearly all of the threads, quotes and images presented or analyzed below were culled from inside these boundaries. However, as we will see, my research suggests that 4chan users believe the site to be somewhat distinct from the rest of the internet; it is a space apart, where the rules, norms and behaviours are incommensurate with those of the broader online realm. Thus, there is something apropos and contextually accurate about confining one’s ethnography within these distinct boundaries.

My actual ethnography of /b/ took place over a full year, beginning in the summer of 2010, and involved three distinct phases: preparation, observation and participation. Each stage took a step towards arriving at a sufficiently emic understanding of 4chan’s culture. As preparation, I looked at coverage of 4chan and Anonymous in the media. This was prior to the Wikileaks affair in the winter of 2010 and the subsequent explosion of Anonymous-related hacktivism, so mainstream coverage of the group was sparse, narrow—focused on either cyber-bullying incidents or online protests— and often hyperbolic. For instance, a FOX News affiliate infamously referred to 4chan and Anonymous as “an internet hate machine” (FOX News, 2007). Coverage in more tech-centric and niche publications, including *Gawker* (Douglas, 2008) and *Wired* (Dibbell, 2009) was more nuanced. I also looked for references to 4chan and Anonymous

in academic literature. While there has since been an increase in 4chan's profile within the academy (eg. Knutilla, 2011; Saklofske, 2011; Coleman, 2011 & 2012), at the time I was only able to locate the work of Gabriella Coleman and Ray Vichot (2009). Both authors focus on Project Chanology: the anti-Scientology protests which emerged out of 4chan and Anonymous in 2008. Coleman's early work situated Chanology within the lineage of earlier hacker-led actions against Scientology and suggested that Anonymous users share hackers' playful relationship with technology, while Vichot's MA thesis explored how Anonymous' tactics and ethics were reconfigured in the shift from online to offline protest.

Having derived some context from this initial exploration, I began my observation in July 2010. Initially, I was content to watch 4chan and its users from the sidelines. In internet parlance, this practice is known as lurking, whereby new arrivals familiarize themselves with the norms and etiquette of an online community prior to participating. This second research phase lasted for approximately four months, during which time I visited /b/ on a daily basis, paying close attention to prominent and recurring patterns of behaviour and communication. I also archived threads and images that I felt were relevant to the broad themes of my research questions, which, at this time were still crystallizing. Discussion in these threads revolved around a number of themes, including the history and evolution of the site, commentary on various Anonymous activities, how 4chan compares to the broader internet—including other online communities and social networking sites—and how the offensive and bigoted content on the site should be interpreted. From this collection of over 100 discussion threads, I chose a much smaller set of threads where discussion was particularly rich or exemplary, and it is from these that much of the material quoted in this essay is sourced.

4chan users seem to revel in discussing the site, its meaning and its significance. Even on /b/, where discussion is not constrained by topical restrictions, a full five per cent of all threads are what Bernstein et al. (2011) refer to as “meta” threads, wherein users discuss /b/ and 4chan. As a result, lurking on /b/ was highly informative. However, Hine (2001) argues that lurking only affords the researcher a portion of the ethnographic picture, for while “the utterances of participants might be preserved. . . the experience of participating is not” (p. 23). In order to arrive at a sufficiently thick description, it became necessary to actively engage with /b/—to become, in the words of 4chan’s argot, a “/b/tard.” I continued to archive threads and lurk occasionally, but in November, 2010, I began participating as both a regular user and as a researcher. As a user, I engaged in conversation and debate on /b/, uploaded content that I found amusing or interesting, and took part in some of the more mundane online pranks perpetrated by the community, including spamming a YouTube user’s account with positive comments and manipulating the results of an online poll conducted by FOX News. I also experimented with the affordances of radical anonymity; in keeping with the community’s norms, I never attached a username or unique tripcode to my posts. I made statements that I did not necessarily agree with, commented on my own posts as if I was someone else, and posted information that I would not necessarily make public in an attributed environment. As a researcher—albeit an anonymous one—I asked users why they participated on 4chan, how they perceived the site, and what they felt about the relationship between 4chan and other forms online community and interaction. Much of my findings in this regard are not necessarily discussed in this paper, but my aim is to illustrate that my claims about 4chan and its users are grounded in sustained ethnographic observation and participation.

Concurrent with my time in the virtual field, I also perused various websites where the discourse of 4chan users is preserved. As a text, 4chan is incredibly temporal, essentially resembling synchronous communication without an archival function; existing threads are simply pushed off the site's servers and into the ether as new discussion threads are started. This temporality means that one must observe the site in real time. However, there are two websites where the activity and history of 4chan are unofficially documented: the 4chanarchive and *Encyclopedia Dramatica*. The former was started in 2006 when a 4chan user became "annoyed enough of missing the birth of new memes and the constant 'What was teh xxxM GET?' questions to actually start learning PHP and delve into the world of webhosting" (4chanarchive, 2012). The describes itself as the "best of 4chan" and allows users to vote for threads that they think are sufficiently "epic" and worthy of preservation (4chanarchive, 2012). If enough users vote for a thread, and if it passes the review process by the operators of 4chanarchive, the thread gets preserved. I was able to search through the archive for additional insight into how historical events, ranging from Chanology to Wikileaks to more mundane occurrences such as changes to the 4chan interface, were received by the community. I was also able to use the site to see how prominent memes and ritual behaviours were utilized prior to my observation period. Lastly, because the content of the archive is partially determined by the users themselves, the kinds of threads that were elected for preservation offer insight into the values of the community.

The latter site, *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, hereafter referred to as "ED," was invaluable to my research. Launched in 2004 as a parody of Wikipedia, the site was not initially affiliated with 4chan or Anonymous. However, ED's relative openness and aversion to censorship attracted members of the subculture and the site quickly transformed into the place "where the vast

parallel universe of Anonymous in-jokes, catchphrases, and obsessions is lovingly annotated” (Dibbell, 2009, para. 9). Shifts in the culture, notable raids, as well as the genesis and meaning of various memes are documented and presented in what can only be termed as Anonymous’ unique editorial voice. It is an excellent resource for scholars examining 4chan’s culture, and it is the place where new users are directed in order to learn about the community’s cultural norms and etiquette. The site allowed me to cross-reference and compare behaviours, discourses and memes encountered on /b/ with the way they are described and annotated in the annals of ED.

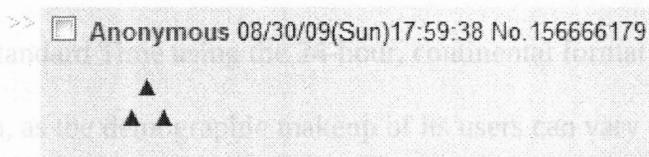
3.1 Methodological Barriers

As should be obvious, there are a number of methodological quagmires involved in conducting an ethnography in an anonymous environment. These limitations are magnified in the case of 4chan, for the community consciously resists categorization and engages in cultural obfuscation (Coleman, 2008 & 2011). Users also revel in acts of online trolling, which Donath (1999) describes as a “game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players” (p. 45). My lengthy period of participant observation on 4chan has afforded me a certain capacity to differentiate between truth and deception, between genuine interaction and trolling, but the problem of authenticity cannot truly be excised from anonymous communication. Lastly, although sites like ED and the 4chanarchive do work against the ephemeral nature of 4chan, they present the site as it is idealized and viewed by users, and not necessarily as it actually is.

Having acknowledged these barriers, I feel that my methodology has been constructed with them in mind, and that it has enabled me to extract valuable and relevant ethnographic data from my observations and experiences. In particular, these barriers were the motivation behind my

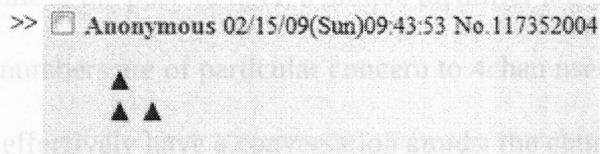
decision to focus my analysis on some of the various memes which circulate on /b/. Coleman (2009) argues that memes work “against the volume of posts and responses” on 4chan, and act as a “locus of memory” for decentralized communities like Anonymous. She states the “meme is that which procures because it circulates largely through constant modification” and it is “that which can unite a group of people which are otherwise dispersed and unconnected.” Often taking the form of image macros—assemblages of pictures and text—or certain ritual behaviours, there are literally hundreds of examples of intra-cultural memes on 4chan. For example, the “Newfags can’t triforce” meme is a signal to identity that delineates between insiders and outsiders.

Essentially a form of call and response, the meme begins when a poster issues a challenge to new users to produce an image of the triforce from the Legend of Zelda video game franchise. The only way to “triforce” effectively involves correctly inputting a series of Unicode commands, the formula for which can be found via a web search or by perusing ED:



However, uninitiated users will often attempt to reproduce the image by copying and pasting it.

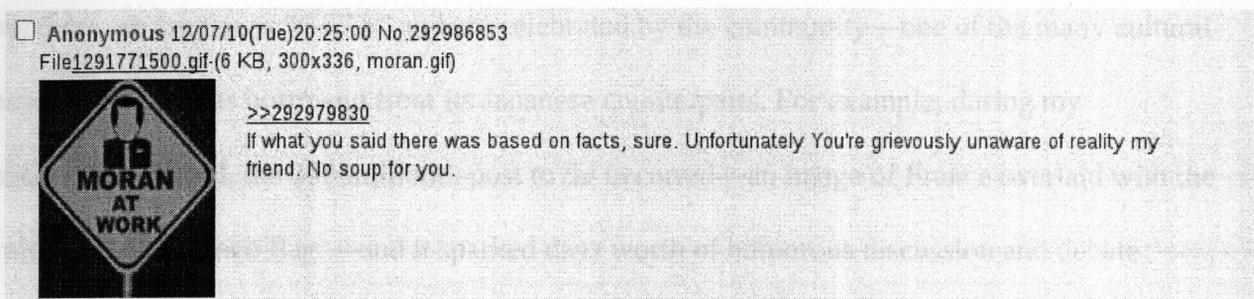
Doing so fails to achieve the proper alignment, and once posted, reveals the user as a newfag:



3.2 Anatomy of a 4chan Post

This paper frequently quotes from relevant 4chan posts and discussion threads. In order to present the form and content of these posts as accurately as possible, I do not alter posts—

spelling and grammatical errors are left intact, for example—and include all the contextual information associated with each post when rendering them into text. Thus, the following post would be displayed as such:



Anonymous 12/07/10(Tue)20:25:00 No.292986853

File1291771500.gif-(6 KB, 300x336, moran.gif) 6 KB

>>292979830

If what you said there was based on facts, sure. Unfortunately You're grievously unaware of reality my friend. No soup for you.

In the top left of each post is a username. This user has left the name field blank, resulting in the default Anonymous username. Next to the name is the date and the time, which is always displayed in Eastern Standard Time using the 24-hour, continental format. Time is an important factor to note on 4chan, as the demographic makeup of its users can vary depending on the time of day. There are different peak hours for example for European users than for North American ones.

To the right of the time is the post number, a unique identifier attached sequentially to every post on the board. These numbers are of particular concern to 4chan users, as they allow one to reply to a given post and effectively have a conversation amidst the churn. The post above is in reply to post #292979830, indicated by the hyperlink preceded by two ">" marks. Using those marks will display the post number as a link, and clicking on it will bring one to the post being replied to. These post numbers are also utilized in a variety of games users play with the 4chan

platform. For example, posts like “Post ending in 69 tells me what I eat for breakfast” are common, and users will often comment on post numbers that end in strings of the same number, referred to as dubs, trips or quads depending on their length. Particularly significant or large post numbers are known as “GETS” and are celebrated by the community—one of the many cultural practices 4chan has borrowed from its Japanese counterparts. For example, during my observation period, the 300 millionth post to /b/ occurred—an image of France overlaid with the colours of the French flag⁵—and it sparked days worth of humorous discussion and debate regarding France.

The second line of a post references the filename of any image that accompanies it. Most users save a substantial volume of images for use on 4chan, evidenced by frequent references to one’s “/b/ folder”, and the names they give to those files can yield information about the participants themselves. In addition, in order to properly understand the meaning of a 4chan post, it is necessary to comprehend the interplay between text and image; in the example post, the user is indicating that the individual they are replying to is a “morán,” an intentional misspelling of moron that is common in 4chan’s argot. In instances where the picture attached to a post contains valuable information, I either include a description of that image in my analysis or post a screen capture of the post in its original form.

4.0 Setting the Scene

“As awful as 4chan (or /b/, or anon, or whatever) is, it’s certainly something, and it would be impossible without the entirely unique commenting system it has in place. It’s totally illogical and yet, somehow, it works. It is a form of communication made possible entirely by the Internet, and it seems not only like a shame but like an impossibility to lose that.”

- Mike Barthel, TheAwl.com

⁵ Figure 3

The significance of 4chan's popularity and the extent of its counter-hegemonic position come further into relief when the site is placed against the backdrop of contemporary social media. Although the form of anonymity available to 4chan users was once considered a defining characteristic of the internet (Turkle, 1995), the advent of web 2.0 and social media has led to a reduction in the capacity for anonymous interaction online. The experience of Facebook, for example, is rooted in one's real-life identity, and when Google recently launched its competing social network, Google +, the company initially banned users who signed up under pseudonyms (Madrigal, 2011). These sites invite users to fill in their religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation, habits, hobbies, friends, family, finances, health, and even their actual physical location, which can be updated in real-time using the GPS technology in one's mobile phone. Accordingly, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg claims we have entered an era of "radical transparency" (Kirkpatrick, D., 2010, p. 209), while former Google executive Eric Schmidt believes the future of the internet involves "true transparency and no anonymity" (Kirkpatrick, M., 2010). Compounding this shift is the way companies like Google and Facebook extend beyond their own domains, allowing users to participate and comment across a vast network of sites using the persistent, and of course real, identity associated with their social networking profile. In the declarative words of *Atlantic* editor Alexis Madrigal (2011), this results in "a radical departure from the way identity and speech interact in the real world" (para. 3) because it creates "tighter links between people's behaviour and their identities than has previously existed" (para. 12).

Concurrent with this reduction in anonymity is a rhetoric which denigrates anonymous communication—particularly the "wildness" (Herold, 2011, p. 4) associated with it—as

anathema to civil discourse. Examples of this are legion: South Korea declared anonymous communication a national problem in 2007 and has since taken steps to suture the internet to the country's national ID system (Farall, 2011); Blizzard Entertainment, the purveyors of the successful *World of Warcraft* franchise, has attempted to force users to post with their real names in the game's official forums (Kuchera, 2010); Facebook product manager Julie Zhou (2010) appealed to website operators to adopt a blanket ban on anonymous commenters in order to prevent such users from "polluting the conversation" (para. 19). This rhetoric has also taken root in the academy, evidenced by a recent anthology edited by Saul Levmore and Martha Nussbaum (2010) entitled *The Offensive Internet*, in which various authors claim the internet has an "anonymity problem" (Levmore, 2010), deride anonymous websites "cyber cesspools" (Leiter, 2010), refer to anonymous users as "juvenilists" (Levmore, 2010) and blame the lack of attribution in the online world for breeding "cyber lynch mobs" (Citron, 2010).

Implicit in much of this criticism of anonymous speech is a rejection of the online/offline dichotomy. Zuckerberg suggests that any distinction between one's online and offline identity belies "a lack of integrity" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199), Zhou (2010) lauds Facebook's ability to "replicate real-world social norms by emphasizing the human qualities of conversation" (para. 17), while Levmore and Nussbaum (2010) argue that "speech on the internet may be regulated at least as much as speech in other venues and media" (p. 9).

4.1 Habermas, the Internet and the Ideal Speech Situation

What unites the criticisms outlined above is that they all share a Habermasian interpretation of internet-mediated discourse, inasmuch as they posit the internet as a kind of public sphere and seek to realize some form of "ideal speech situation" (Habermas, 1981) online. This notion, and

the theories which underlie it, offers an intriguing, albeit somewhat counter-intuitive starting point for a discussion of 4chan's political efficacy. Beginning with the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, Habermas' project has revolved around articulating the public sphere as a "space in which questions can be raised and negotiated publicly, freed from the constraints of tradition and power" (Freundlieb, Hudson, & Rundell, 2004, p. 7). Although Habermas (2006) has argued against an interpretation of the internet as a public sphere, the notion that computer-mediated communication offers an idealized forum for discourse has been around since the earliest days of the networked computing. Consider, for example, Barlow's (1986) famous celebration of the internet as the "home of the Mind" where "all may enter without privilege or prejudice" and "where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular" (para. 1-8).

As Herold (2011) notes, the application of Habermas' theory to the internet is "tantalizingly easy" (p. 10). However, doing so is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, in Habermas' view, the public sphere is not an end unto itself, but rather a means towards the 'legitimation' of the democratic state by its people. Such an application is not particularly applicable to the online context; the web's transnational character and the tendency for online political discourse to cluster in the form of 'issue publics' (Habermas, 2006; Rogers, 2004) suggests that the linkage between the public sphere and the nation-state is complicated, rather than substantiated, by the internet. Furthermore, as is noted by both Herold (2011) and Beng (2011), the Habermasian emphasis on governance results in a narrow view of the internet, whereby political discourse online is valued to the extent which it affects change offline. While such work can certainly advance our understanding of the inter-relationship between the internet and society, the

insistence upon an offline anchoring for events is not very useful when studying online interaction, as users do not necessarily extend their offline identities into virtual space. As Tom Boellerstoff avers, “demand[ing] that. . . research always incorporate. . . the actual world for ‘context’ presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts; it renders. . . inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline” (qtd. in Herold, 2011, p. 9).

Secondly, and more relevant to this essay, Habermas’ framework leaves little room for conceptualizing how non-rational forms of speech can be considered political or counter-hegemonic. In order to evacuate power from what he refers to as the “discursive will formation,” Habermas envisions a pure form of the speech act, oriented towards mutual understanding and rational consensus and premised upon transparency:

[F]or rational communication to function properly in the Habermasian model, transparency must be evident at two levels: that of the individual (because autonomous action is premised on subjects knowing their intentions through rational reflection), as well as the social (interlocutors must know the motivations of other speakers via rational discussion in a shared vernacular, because any motive apart from a desire to participate fully in the collective search for truth is ruled out of court. Normative legitimations that are not thoroughly understood by all interlocutors and premised entirely on the force of the better argument are *prima facie* invalid.). (Gardiner, 2004, p. 35)

To this end, Habermas regards other forms of language, particularly irony, parody and satire, as parasitic to the public sphere, presumably because they compromise the transparency of the ideal communicative process, or because they introduce elements of strategic action into deliberation (Gardiner, 2004). Again, this premise cannot be easily mapped onto an analysis of online discourse; the mediated nature of the internet impedes transparency, and—as should be evident by anyone who has observed online forums—discourse between internet users is seldom rational

or deliberative. Although Herold (2011) makes this point specifically about the Chinese internet, his use of brackets makes it clear that such a characterization can be applied to the internet in general:

The (Chinese) Internet cannot be described as a space for rational and detached deliberations, nor can it be seen as an egalitarian tool for the equal expression of opinions by all the citizens of a state. Instead of a *polyphony* of voices creating rational bases for the legitimization and running of the state according to the wishes of its citizens, the (Chinese) Internet is filled with a *cacophony* of conflicting opinions, irrelevant or emotional outbursts, images stretching from the beautiful to the grotesque and beyond, etc. While the notion of the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ is therefore intriguing and attractive, its application to interpretations of the (Chinese) Internet produces less than desirable results. (p. 12)

Thus, if we hope to arrive at a more accurate and nuanced understanding of political speech—or more accurately, political expression—on the internet, we need to acknowledge the cacophonous nature of the medium and consider the impact of the non-rational communication that is so pervasive on it. For, as Dahlgren (1995) astutely observes, “any model of communication that tries to eliminate the arational, in the end risks becoming irrational” (p. 86).

5.0 Setting the [Ob]scene

“4chan and Anonymous are the defenders of the Internets and the offenders of everything else but cats.”

The title is a reference to the username given to 4chan - Encyclopedia Dramatica entry on “4chan.”

What makes 4chan such a fascinating case study then, is the way it is simultaneously one of the most arational, least transparent forums on the internet *and* a hotbed of political activity. 4chan users, and the broader Anonymous community, have come together to protest the Church of Scientology, wage campaigns of electronic civil disobedience in support of both the whistleblowing website Wikileaks and the file-sharing site known as The Pirate Bay, and against various forms of internet censorship, including the much-maligned Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the

United States. The site is both a celebration and mobilization of online cacophony, and thus offers a glimpse into how the internet is giving rise to new forms of political engagement.

The following section concerns itself not so much with the explicitly political activities associated with 4chan, but rather the particular ethical modes and political constructions within the community which are mobilized during such actions. For, as Carpini and Williams (2001) point out, “politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are embedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life” (p. 16). I offer a number of examples of how 4chan users deploy forms of discourse which fall outside of normative rational framework—humour, parody, obscenity, anonymity, etc.— as a means of articulating a shared position towards the internet and critiquing the contemporary hegemony of social media. The work of Bakhtin looms large in this analysis, and borrowing from Herold and Marolt (2011), the section is divided into the ways in which 4chan users create, celebrate and ultimately instrumentalize aspects of their online carnival.

5.1 Creating: We Are Anonymous

One of the most visible and persistent memes on 4chan is the mass noun of Anonymous⁶. The title is a reference to the username given to 4chan users who do not enter any text in the name field when posting. On the /b/ board, a full 90 per cent of all posts are made using the default ‘Anonymous’ username (Bernstein et al., 2011). Thus, to the uninitiated, 4chan can read like a schizophrenic soliloquy, where a single user named Anonymous carries on multiple conversations with himself. In fact, the Anonymous phenomenon began as an inside joke, where users who preferred to post with names or tripcodes⁷ mocked anonymous users as if they were a

6 Figure 4

7 Tripcodes are a means of identity verification that does not require registration. They are a common feature of 4chan-style messageboards. Tripcodes are essentially a kind of password that is inputted after the name and then run through a cryptographic hash function, generating a persistent series of characters. Using the common

single person. As ED sarcastically notes, “recent research has proven that Anonymous is in fact, a single twelve year-old boy named Tom who has over 9,000 fake AIM accounts and singlehandedly makes every single post on the Anonymous’ website” (“Anonymous”, 2012).

This form of anonymity—where persistent identity and the accumulation of reputation is nearly impossible—needs to be considered as distinct from pseudonymity. As Froomkin (1995) notes, “[pseudo]nyms allow for continuity of identity to be maintained over a period of time. A person posting under a [pseudo]nym can develop an image and a reputation just like any other online personality” (para. 35). The reality of the contemporary internet is that nearly all anonymous social interaction on the medium falls under the umbrella of pseudonymity. Most forums require users to register with an email address and a unique username, and as such, the capacity for persistent identity is still present. Even on a forum such as Slashdot.org, one of the few sites that allows for truly anonymous posting, over 80 per cent of users still employ pseudonyms (Gomez et al, 2008). 4chan is one of the only English-speaking online forums where genuine anonymity⁸ is the norm. I have often referred to the environment on /b/ as radically anonymous, whereas Dibbell (2010) uses the term “radical opacity” to describe 4chan and position it opposite the notion of radical transparency.

Although it is now the defining characteristic of the site, anonymity has a contentious history on 4chan. When the site began, most participants used pseudonyms and tripcodes, and

2channel format, “name#tripcode” when entered as a username becomes “name!3GqYIJ30bs” when displayed in a post. Readers of a board can thus identify postings made by the same person by comparing the tripcodes.

8 Although I employ this distinction, it must be noted that in practice, 4chan is an example of what Froomkin (1995) calls “traceable anonymity”. 4chan still logs the IP address of anyone who posts, meaning those who violate the law or upload illegal content can still be identified and held accountable. Individuals who posted bomb threats on 4chan, as well as a young man who boasted about hacking Sarah Palin’s email account, were arrested after their IP addresses were forwarded to authorities (Zetter, 2008). 4chan users are very much aware of this limitation. They often reference getting banned—typically abbreviated to “b&”—by the site’s moderators for breaking the rules, and those who find themselves in trouble with the law are held up as examples of what not to do on 4chan.

moot even encouraged users to fill in the name field (Shii, 2004). This changed in 2004, when a user known as Shii penned an essay in defense of anonymity and argued that 4chan should emulate 2channel—the Japanese predecessor to Futaba Channel—where users post without using pseudonyms or names. Swayed by the essay, moot initiated a period of “Forced Anon” on 4chan, where the name field was removed, forcing users to post anonymously. Throughout 4chan’s history, Forced Anon was enabled and disabled a number of times, but the name field returned in 2008 and has remained since (“Forced Anon,” 2012). However, the culture of radical anonymity which took root in its absence has persisted, and most users consider names and tripcodes to be counter to the ethic of the site. Those who, in the words of one user, “try and stand on top of the sea of shit” by creating an identity for themselves, either through tripcodes, usernames, or even a distinctive style of posting, are ridiculed and shamed. Derided as namefags or tripfags, it is not uncommon to see such users confronted with the following piece of sarcasm, copied and pasted from ED:

Hi there!

You seem to have made a bit of a mistake in your post. Luckily, the users of 4chan are always willing to help you clear this problem right up! You appear to have used a tripcode when posting, but your identity has nothing at all to do with the conversation! Whoops! You should always remember to stop using your tripcode when the thread it was used for is gone, unless another one is started! Posting with a tripcode when it isn’t necessary is poor form. You should always try to post anonymously, unless your identity is absolutely vital to the post that you’re making!

Now, there’s no need to thank me - I’m just doing my bit to help you get used to the anonymous image-board culture! (“Tripcode,” 2012)

The shaming of those who violate the Anonymous ethic is just one of the ways in which 4chan users work to maintain the de-individuated character of the site. As well, the fact that they do so is evidence of the value 4chan users place on their particular brand of anonymity.

In my experience, this value is discussed in two ways. The first echoes the common defense of anonymity as an enabler of free speech. However, whereas many value anonymous speech only insofar as it contributes to an argument towards truth (Levmore and Nussbaum, 2010)—for example, allowing one to speak out against an oppressive regime or act as a whistle-blower—4chan users interpret the importance of anonymity more broadly; in particular, users value the opportunity to transgress social mores. For example, on Thanksgiving in 2010, when asked what they were grateful for, a significant number of users expressed something along these lines:

Anonymous 11/26/10(Fri)04:26:11 No.290106XXX

i am thankful that despite the existence of monsters like Google and Facebook, there is still a place on the Internet where you can post pictures of terrible things and laugh about it.

because it IS cathartic, and without catharsis we will all turn into the Taliban and our moms.

thank you, moot. believe it or not, /b/'s insanity keeps some of us sane

These comments, as well as various image macros⁹ produced by the community, suggest that users conceive of 4chan as a space apart from both the broader, attributed internet of social media, as well as from the real world. Like the carnival, 4chan is a place where you can say what you want, be free from hierarchy, and engage in the cathartic pleasure of laughing at something in bad taste. When asked how 4chan compared to a site like Facebook, users were adamant that such expression was not possible on social media sites that bridge the gap between online and offline:

Anonymous 11/23/10(Tue)17:58:38 No.289460XXX

whenever i post something on fb i feel fake.. it has to be "safe" for all my contacts. on 4chan i can be myself.

Anonymous 11/23/10(Tue)18:21:31 No.289465XXX

>>289460716

>>289460716

9 Figure 5

I agree, I feel like I have to censor myself everytime I post something on facebook. Which is probably why I post something maybe once a month.

Secondly, 4chan users feel as if anonymity is one of the underlying reasons why the site is so amusing and such a prolific producer of popular internet culture:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)18:36:16 No.290693XXX

I love chaos of this place, its diversity, creativity and, sometimes, power. I'm also interested in the internet culture and nowadays most of internet culture has its origin on 4chan.

ME-tan !AW11phd3JE 11/23/10(Tue)17:57:26 No.289460XXX

Facebook will never produce the epically funny shit that we have. They are just too controlled and sterile.

The reasons for this are perhaps best articulated by Poole in his interview with Dibbell (2010):

Consider, Poole explains, how the fixed identities in other online communities can stifle creativity: where usernames are required (whether real or pseudonymous), a new user who posts a few failed attempts at humor will soon find other users associating that name with failure. "Even if you're posting gold by day eight," says Poole, "they'll be like, 'Oh, this guy sucks.'" Names, in other words, make failure costly, thus discouraging even the attempt to succeed. By the same token, namelessness makes failure cheap—nearly costless, reputation-wise, in a setting like 4chan, where the Anonymous who posted a lame joke five minutes ago might well be the same Anonymous who's mocking it hilariously right now. (p. 85)

There are a number of important points to take away from this discussion of anonymity on 4chan. The first is that, as Barthel (2010) notes, "it is a form of communication made possible entirely by the Internet" (para. 8); such radical anonymity is not possible outside of computer-mediated communication. In the real world, even within an anonymous mob, one is still able to attach utterances to a single, identifiable individual. To restate Madrigal's (2011) earlier comments, the radical anonymity of 4chan, like the radical transparency espoused by Mark Zuckerberg, represents a departure from the way identity and utterances function in the real world. To participate on 4chan is to be reminded that the internet does not just extend identity

into virtual space, but instead allows for entirely new forms of interaction and subjectivity. This potential is acknowledged by 4chan users through the kind of self-deprecating, ambivalent humour which Bakhtin identifies as a component of carnival; it is commonplace to see remarks about how the veil of CMC allows people to be more hyperbolic and asinine than in real life, and various ED entries are as likely to lampoon anonymity as they are to celebrate it:

It's been scientifically proven that the Internets instantly turns you into an ass. This is due to the fact that unlike IRL, there are absolutely no social consequences to how you behave. . . Anonymity also allows people to entertain bizarre notions that would otherwise be suppressed or dismissed as completely inappropriate for an intelligent human being. Prior to the invention of the Internets, geographic separation and social sensibility would have made people think twice before having a bowel movement in their under clothing. The Internets however has facilitated the formation of a communities¹⁰ where similarly damaged individuals provide each other with mutual legitimization. ("Internets", 2011)

The second point arises out of the first, and also resonates with the carnival. For Bakhtin, the features of carnival—the wearing of masks, the ritualized degradation and an emphasis on the “lower stratum” of the body—affected a great levelling, creating a “genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). Fiske (1989) refers to carnival as “a representation of the social at the level of materiality on which all are equal” (p. 83). Although 4chan shares carnival’s predilection for degradation and the grotesque body, this levelling is achieved principally through the anonymity of the platform, which divests users of ranks, privileges and norms, and subsumes them into the collective body of Anonymous. This form of interaction, which “does not know footlights” (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 7), necessarily creates a shared subject position amongst users; they are not simply anonymous, but part of Anonymous. As one user notes:

¹⁰ This passage was also a link to WettingWonderland.com, described on its homepage as “a community site for wetting and diaper lovers”.

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)17:53:42 No.290687XXX
There is something for everyone, all there is is [faux] judgement and insults, so between that and anon you can't actually be excluded: everyone "belongs".

6.2 Creating: Doing it for the Lulz

If there is a single dominant thread that runs through Bakhtin's book on Rabelais, it is undoubtedly laughter. In his exploration of the popular folk humour of the middle ages, Bakhtin discerns a form of laughter capable of liberating people from dominant norms and disturbing the rigid hierarchies of the era through inversion. Bakhtin (2009), who has been accused of offering a naively utopic view of folk humour¹¹, does not mince his words, declaring that laughter bears an "indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" (p. 89). It is important to note that Bakhtin does not intend his analysis to apply to all laughter, and he takes pains to remind readers that the forms of humour that characterized medieval festivities have been repressed or sublimated in the modern era. Instead, Bakhtin is concerned specifically with what he terms carnival laughter, a form of humour with distinct traits. Carnival laughter is universal and ambivalent; it is shared by all, and directed at all, although it frequently targets the serious, official or dominant norms of culture—what Bakhtin (2009) refers to as the "upper stratum" (p. 88). It is also non-purposive; carnival laughter is laughter "for laughter's sake" (p. 5). For Bakhtin (2009), laughter "does not build stakes" and so long as it remained outside of purpose, it "created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian" (p. 95).

On 4chan, carnival laughter manifests on 4chan in the form of lulz¹², a pluralized bastardization of the more common term 'LOL,' meaning to laugh out loud. In her study of Anonymous, Coleman (2012b) offers an incredibly rich description of the lulz:

11 For a summary and rebuttal of this criticism, see Gardiner (1992).

12 Figure 6

These four letters denote the pleasures attained from generating and sharing jokes and memes such as LOLcats and the cartoon pedophile mascot Pedobear. But they also suggest how easily and casually trolls can violently undermine the sense of security enjoyed by carefree denizens of the “real world” by, for instance, ordering scores of unpaid pizzas to be delivered to a single address, or publishing one’s phone number and private communications and credit-card numbers and hard-drive contents and any other information one might think to be “personal” or secure. Perhaps most important, lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, our aesthetic sensibilities, the inviolability of the world as it is; trolls invalidate that world by gesturing toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it—to pull the carpet from under us—whenever they feel the urge and without warning.

Similar to carnival laughter, the lulz are non-purposive. ED states “doing something for the lulz is the only reason to do anything” (“I did it for the lulz,” 2012). There is significant debate within 4chan and Anonymous as to exactly what the lulz are, but no intra-community authority exists to designate activities as officially lulzy. Thus, everything from juvenile pranks to coordinated acts of protest have been done for the lulz.

The centrality of laughter and lulz to the 4chan community cannot be overstated. The Deterritorial Support Group (2011) even goes as far as to suggest that 4chan functions on a kind of “lulz-based psychic economy” (para. 5), and users consistently cite 4chan as a locus for the folk humour of the internet:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)18:38:02 No.290693XXX
>>290681240

I think a big part of 4chan is the ever mutating voice of the people. It’s origins didn’t plan it, but this place is the fastest changing group of linguists and comedians in the world, imho.

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)18:40:30 No.290693XXX
4chan isn’t touched by corporate media, so it’s extremely refreshing. I can come here and embrace the chaos and insanity and free thinking of other people. There’s a good humor element that draws me, too.

However, to fall under the umbrella of the carnivalesque, it is necessary for laughter to be mobilized against the humourlessness of official culture (Dentith, 1995). In the case of 4chan,

this is what distinguishes between LOLs and lulz. For while there may be no consensus about what exactly defines lulz, there is general agreement that the best lulz are derived from targets who take themselves too seriously. As one of the trolls quoted by Schwartz (2008) says:

“You look for someone who is full of it, a real blowhard. Then you exploit their insecurities to get an insane amount of drama, laughs and lulz. Rules would be simple: 1. Do whatever it takes to get lulz. 2. Make sure the lulz is widely distributed. This will allow for more lulz to be made. 3. The game is never over until all the lulz have been had.” (para. 9)

Although often compared to schaudenfraude, this particular interpretation suggests that the lulz resonate more with the comic inversions that occurred during carnival. The lulz thus appear to be tactical; like Bakhtin, 4chan users and the broader Anonymous community appear to view laughter as something that can disrupt or “uncrown” power. The above troll seems less interested in laughing at another’s expense, per se, than with witnessing the “drama, laughs and lulz” that occur when a target is toppled from its pedestal.

6.3 Celebrating: OP is a Fag

One of the oldest¹³ memes internal to 4chan is the phrase “OP is a fag”¹⁴. The acronym OP is 4chan slang for original poster, and ostensibly the meme is used to denigrate and insult the user who initiated a given discussion thread. However, like much of 4chan’s culture, analysis of the meme reveals its polysemy; its meaning is not to be found in what it denotes. To begin with, OP is a fag is one of the most oft-repeated memes on 4chan. I cannot recall any lengthy discussion where it was not used at least once, and it is often one of the first replies offered in any thread. This repetition invites one to consider the phrase as a kind of ritual performance. As one user remarked to me after finding a particular image I posted amusing:

¹³ Memes on 4chan are constantly mutating and evolving, and the culture’s common memetic reference points change over time. However, like ‘Anonymous,’ the phrase OP is a fag has persisted, and I was able to find instances of its use in many of the oldest threads available on 4chanarchive.org.

¹⁴ Figure 7

Anonymous 02/11/11(Fri)13:19:00 No.308726639

yay oc! congratz OP, you made me chuckle.

But tradition obligates me to tell you that you're still a fag.

As well, despite the plethora of insults exchanged on 4chan, it is important to note that many users acknowledge the futility of anonymously insulting an anonymous user. In the absence of fixed identities and reputations, such utterances cannot truly achieve the desired perlocutionary effect. As Hiroyuki Nishimura, founder of the Japanese messageboard 2channel notes, “under the anonymous system, even though your opinion/information is criticized, you don’t know with whom to be upset” (quoted in Furukawa, 2003).

If OP is a fag is not always intended as a genuine slight, then how are we to understand the phrase? We can turn to Bakhtin to elucidate the meaning behind the meme. The most obvious interpretation of OP is a fag is that it is an example of the billingsgate, “the curses, oaths and popular blazons” that predominated during carnival (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 5). Such language was highly ritualized, “grammatically and semantically isolated from context and. . . regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb” (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 16). For Bakhtin, this ‘language of the marketplace’ was characterized by forms of degradation and abuse that contributed to the suspension of hierarchies and dominant norms. Carnival oaths effected a form of “free and familiar” contact between participants by allowing them to engage in the kind of mutual mockery that occurs between friends. The ritual debasement of all participants during carnival celebrated the “gay relativity of all things” (Bakhtin, 2009), and enshrined the carnivalesque moment as one where all ideas are endlessly tested and contested. This dual function of billingsgate, and its status on 4chan is summed up by a user who claims:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)17:37:08 No.290683XXX

I come here in order to feel companionship with other like minded idiots

Such performative insults work alongside the anonymity of the platform to enact an equal dialogic playing field where no idea or user can be elevated above any other. Simply put, nothing one can say on 4chan can ever prevent you from being called a fag. Hence why a popular variation of the meme states that “OP is always a fag.” Likewise, on *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, the words “OP” and “you” frequently serve as hyperlinks to the entry on “fag.”

The desire for “automatic dissent” (Knutilla, 2011) and the deindividuation of carnival proper embodied in the OP is a fag meme can be read as a critique of the contemporary internet’s tendency to act as an echo chamber. As social media sites continue to offer an increasingly individuated experience of the web—what Langlois et al. (2009) refer to as “me-centricity”—fragmented audiences tend to self-select information compatible with their existing ideological outlooks. This process is assisted by various algorithms which treat the individual as the unit of analysis and customize one’s experience of the web based on past behaviours. Legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2008) has outlined the echo chamber thesis in a series of books and scholarly articles, and he notes:

The rise of blogs makes it all the easier for people to live in echo chambers of their own design. Indeed some bloggers, and many readers of blogs, live in information cocoons. Shared identities are often salient on the blogosphere, in a way that makes polarization both more likely and more likely to be large. . . [B]ecause of self-sorting, people are often reading like-minded points of view, in a way that can breed greater confidence, more uniformity within groups, and more extremism. (p. 94)

In contrast, users of 4chan consistently express a preference for polyphony. Throughout the course of my research, I would periodically query users as to why they chose to participate in the community. Often, these threads would receive only a few replies—which, given the incredibly temporal nature of the site should not necessarily be read as significant—but on a few occasions,

I was fortunate enough to enter into a fairly lively discussion. Answers were varied, ranging from those who found 4chan to be a good source of breaking news to others who felt the site was home to the best pornography, but a common theme did emerge: despite the widespread availability of social interaction online, users flock to 4chan because they see it as a bastion of randomness, contingency and dissensus on an increasingly monologic web:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)17:46:07 No.290685XXX
>>290685190

Because anon is the dumbest, smartest, meanest, nicest, most cold hearted, passionate etc etc son of a bitch on the web. Located in this little board we have people of every extreme, and everything in between

One user contrasted the polyphony of 4chan with other, more bunkered spaces:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)17:42:42 No.290685XXX

Because every other website has become a subcategory of another subcategory. Mylifeisbro, mylifeisavarage, fmylife... /b/ is one of the few places where you just look through some shit until you find some shit you like, instead of looking for something you like and go through all of it.

Another noted that their participation on 4chan causes them to routinely rethink their own ideological position and opinions:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)19:00:48 No.290697XXX

the level of complexity of everything on 4chan intrigues me. just when you think you understand everything, you realize that you actually know nothing.

In this regard, 4chan serves as a counterpoint to Sunstein's thesis. Based on the above comments, the 18 million users who browse 4chan every month may be actively seeking out an online environment outside of their comfort zone, where they can "expect the unexpected" (Coleman, 2011) and engage in *dialogue* with the other. It is thus possible to interpret OP is a fag not as an insult, but rather as a means of maintaining and celebrating the carnivalesque character of 4chan which makes that kind of interaction possible.

6.4 Celebrating: The Internet is Serious Business

During my perusal of the 4chanarchive, I encountered a discussion thread from 2007, wherein participants compared 4chan to the Something Awful (SA) internet community. As Stryker (2011) notes, the SA forums are considered a kind of predecessor to 4chan, and Poole was known to be very active in the SA community before starting his own site. However, unlike 4chan, SA requires registration and a small membership fee, and makes use of persistent pseudonyms. As a result, 4chan was, and still is, often framed in opposition to Something Awful despite the significant overlap in culture. It is in this context that I first encountered the phrase “The Internet is Serious Business”:

Anonymous 08/05/07(Sun)02:40:56 No.35121599
>>35121345

Ironically enough, SA actually thinks the internet is serious business. They are obsessed with "post quality", e-Reputations, and "being normal on the internet". Yea, basically everything 4chan is not. Even BYOB and FYAD humor is completely different from 4chan /b/ humor, interesting how they have common backgrounds though.

Anonymous 07/18/07(Wed)15:26:08 No.33345762
4chan doesn't pull shit like this.

The gaiafaggots from 4chan do.

Either way, the internet is SERIOUS BUSINESS *FLAILING ARMS AROUND*

Encyclopedia Dramatica notes that ““The Internet is Serious Business”¹⁵ is a phrase used to remind those who have just been successfully trolled that being mocked on the Internet is, in fact, the end of the world” (“The Internet is Serious Business,” 2012). Although popular on 4chan, the meme is believed to have originated on the General Mayhem forums—another predecessor to 4chan that closed down in 2002 (“HardOCP,” 2012). The phrase is used to make fun of those who appear to take the internet too seriously. Whether you are participating in a

15 Figure 8

heated debate or flamewar, expressing outrage that someone said something cruel to you in an online forum, or espousing a moral panic about the effects of the internet, you are engaging in serious business. Similarly, the meme—sometimes minus the reference to the internet—is often levelled at those who express dogmatic opinions or appear to react hyperbolically to acts of trolling.

It is not by coincidence that this paper's title references the Serious Business meme, for I believe it evinces a significant amount of information about the ethos of 4chan and the ways in which participants in the community conceive of the internet. By mocking those who take the internet seriously, users are expressing the belief that the rules are different online. The "real-world social norms" mentioned earlier by Zhuo (2010), do not necessarily apply, and one should not consider behaviours and utterances online as equivalent to their offline counterparts. Such an assertion foregrounds the lived reality of the online world; it acknowledges that the medium of the internet enables and allows for forms of subjectivity and socialization not possible in the real world—such as the radical anonymity of 4chan—and mocks those who fail to take into account the different contexts. It also constructs a clear antagonism between 4chan users and the dominant hegemony of social media, which aims to close the gap between online and offline identity.

Although some of the actions and raids undertaken by both 4chan and Anonymous have moved from the internet into the real world, the distinction between online and offline is one of the more prevalent ethics within the community. Particularly, users often suggest that one's trolling and pranking activity should be confined to the internet. For example, ED describes Chronic Troll Syndrome as:

an internet disease. . . . that is generally present in trolls. It causes the given troll to be unable to tell the difference between internet and IRL limits. As a result, the troll is no longer able to comprehend what is appropriate to say and do when dealing with IRL people in contrast with the Internets. Symptoms include being inconsiderate and generally assshatty to friends and family, the common offensive use of racial epithets, and a tendency to interfere in other people's business uninvited "for the laughs." ("Chronic Troll Syndrome," 2012)

However, the Serious Business meme accomplishes more than simply affirming the alterity of the internet. It is also a mockery of the moral panics used to justify surveillance and censorship on the web. To illustrate this, I turn to the case of Parry Aftab, an American lawyer and child rights advocate who specializes in online privacy and cyber-harassment concerning youth. Aftab is a fairly public figure, making frequent appearances on mainstream news programs to discuss issues pertaining to cyber-bullying and internet safety, and she is known for slogans such as "Stop, Block and Tell." After an appearance on *Good Morning America* in 2010, an *Encyclopedia Dramatica* entry about Aftab was created, stating:

People like Parry Aftab are a threat as they wish to restrict the very tool that we use to fight oppressive governments so they can make sure their kids don't get called names on the internet. Parry who instead of reminding children and parents of the parable "Sticks and stones" wants to make it illegal to call people names. . . The real problem with her making internet bullying illegal is this: "if I cannot make fun of people, why wouldn't the next step be I cannot make fun of politicians or government". You might be thinking "that would never happen, we have enough intelligence to stop that from happening"¹⁶. Oh really? Name one time where a censorship about a specific subject didn't blur into multiple subjects over time. You can't can you? ("Parry Aftab," 2012)

This slippery slope argument may or may not be possessed of merit but it nevertheless reveals that discussions of serious business cannot be separated from an overtly political orientation towards the internet. Like Bakhtin (2009), users appear to view seriousness as a "spokesman of power" (p. 94). By designating Aftab's rhetoric as serious business, 4chan users and those behind the ED article are commenting on the relations of power that lie behind attempts to civilize the

16 Amusingly, this sentence was a hyperlink, directing users to the ED entry for "unrealistic expectations".

internet. There is a belief that the democratic potential of the internet—the ability to “fight oppressive governments”—cannot be untangled from its status as an enabler of problematic behaviour; an attack on one is an attack on the other. As well, in a nod to the tactical status of the lulz, the above quote suggests that the appropriate response to power is to “make fun” of it, something which 4chan users frequently do to Aftab¹⁷.

It is noteworthy that this wariness and subsequent mockery extends beyond obvious targets like Aftab to encompass all those who posit an idealized, or even utopic, conception of the web. Towards the end of my observation, I posted John Perry Barlow’s (1996) famous “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” to /b/ to gauge the reaction amongst users. Given Barlow’s assertion that cyberspace is distinct from the real world, one would expect his ideas to garner sympathy amongst 4channers. However, Barlow does discuss the internet in fairly utopic terms, suggesting it will cause existing institutions to wither and bring about a “more humane and fair” world. Apparently, for some 4chan users, such an orientation still reeks of serious business. Mere seconds after I posted Barlow’s essay, the following passage:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. (para. 1)

was quickly translated—or more accurately, excrementalized—into:

Anonymous 06/30/11(Thu)23:27:33 No.337936931

Governments of the industrial world..

We are cowardly white males, mostly in our early twenties, who cower in our rooms posting funny pictures, gore and CP on a message board.

We have no lives, motivation or hacking skills. We lack cohesiveness, and instantly destroy anyone who posts enough identifying information, regardless who they are.

We ask humbly that we may gargle on your industrial grade cum.

The above post is typical of the self-deprecating and grotesque tone of 4chan's discourse, a facet which aligns the site quite closely with the carnivalesque. However, it is also further evidence of the way users reject any vision of the web that denies, ignores or obfuscates the medium's low[er] culture. 4chan, particularly /b/, is a celebration of the irreducible plurality of the internet¹⁸, a plurality that most certainly includes pornography, obscenity, deviance, prejudice, criminality, uncivil discourse, erroneous information, etc. Should one forget that these "counterworlds" (Theall, 1999) are part of the make-up of the internet, 4chan users will gleefully remind you of their presence.

6.5 Carnival as Articulation

Through the above examples I have illustrated how 4chan users create and maintain a carnivalesque atmosphere, and more importantly, how that mode of interaction has given rise to a critical perspective towards the contemporary internet. However, before moving to my final case study, some interpretation is necessary to clarify precisely *how* 4chan can be deemed political and *why* it can be used as an argument for broadening our understanding of political communication on the internet. To do this, I supplement the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) with the insights of Kelty (2008), Jasper (2007) and Gray (2006).

6.5.1 Laclau & Mouffe

If Habermas' deliberative democracy represents one pole of contemporary democratic theory, then its opposite can be found in the model of *agonistic pluralism*, first put forth by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) in *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*. Building on the work of Carl Schmitt (1996), who recast the political not as the reconciliation of competing

¹⁸ This is perhaps best captured linguistically, as 4chan users often opt for the term "internets" over "internet." What started as a means of mocking George W. Bush, who infamously declared that there were "rumours on the internets," has become a means of acknowledging and celebrating the polyphony of the web.

values and interests through consensus or deliberation, but as conflict between enemies, they criticize Habermas' claim that there exists a "domain that would not be subject to the pluralism of values and where a consensus without exclusion could be established" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 91). Contra Habermas, Laclau and Mouffe assert that conflict and antagonism are inherent to the democratic logic because the two aspects that comprise it—*individual* liberty and *collective* governance—are "irreconcilable in the last instance" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 4). As a result, there can be no true consensus, but rather only the hegemonic imposition of one interpretation of liberty and equality onto and over others. Thus, the goal of a radical politics cannot and should not be to evacuate power from politics, as Habermas attempts to do in the construction of his ideal speech situation, but rather to create relations of power that are more consistent with democratic values. Laclau and Mouffe are an early example of post-rational thinking, as their project seeks to pluralize political actors and elucidate the politics inherent in everyday practices. Their schema does away with essential political forms, including both class and rational deliberation, and states simply that "political practice constructs the interests it represents" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 120). This is a fairly gross reduction of Laclau and Mouffe's extensive corpus, but their work is the basis on which much of what Crossley and Roberts (2004) refer to as the "postmodern" criticism of Habermas rests, and their influence can be seen in the likes of Fraser (1992), Warner (2002) and others who argue that Habermas' normative proceduralism "suppresses sociocultural diversity in constituting an arena inimical to difference" (Asen, 2000, p. 45).

Like Habermas, Laclau and Mouffe are towering figures in the contemporary field of communicative action, and thus a thorough examination or retelling of their theoretical framework is thus beyond the remit of this paper. Instead, I wish to focus on a facet of their

theory which is of strategic relevance to my understanding of 4chan's politics: the concept of articulation. In *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) developed a theory of how hegemony is created, maintained and potentially destabilized—so as to be recreated—through an array of primarily discursive practices. Their own lexicon and description of articulation is complex, but it is aptly summed up by Angus (2000):

The concept of articulation is concerned with the politics of common sense in which discursive interventions modify the field of power. Thus, legitimations of the social order succeed, not so much by repressing already formulated alternatives, but by preventing their formulation or, later, by recuperating formulated alternatives within the dominant articulation and thereby, of course, changing their meaning. (p. 170)

Articulation theory thus explores the ways in which social actors can modify discourse and meaning, and how social orders prevent the possibility of (re)articulation. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue all social practices include an act of articulation (p. 113), and that the social and the political exist as the product of these articulations. Every day, we engage in articulatory practices, and, as I will argue, participation on 4chan is a form of articulation. As I've shown, the rise of web 2.0 and the enclosure of the digital commons that accompanied it has threatened the capacity for anonymous interaction online and rendered hegemonic the notion that speech on the internet should be rational, transparent and equivalent to speech elsewhere. In response, the activities of 4chan users and the broader anonymous culture can be viewed as an attempt to re-articulate the internet as a space of fluid identity, dissensus and play.

In the context of this paper, I am less interested with the entire process of articulation than with its formative stages. For Laclau and Mouffe, articulation necessarily begins with a double logic of equivalence and difference. Logics of equivalence find the common meanings between elements in order to bring them together, while logics of difference break apart discourses by

identifying their conflicted meanings. In the case of social movements or political formations, the logic of equivalence articulates a common bond or subject position between different actors. The logic of difference, in turn, constructs an antagonistic relationship between that subject position and the dominant hegemony. Like Schmitt (1996), Laclau and Mouffe see “the high points of politics” as precisely those instances where “the enemy is recognized, in concrete clarity, as the enemy” (p. 67). However, as Mouffe (2005) points out, she and Laclau prefer the terms *we* and *they* rather than Schmitt’s friend/enemy dichotomy.

Given the anonymous and ephemeral nature of 4chan, it is difficult to comprehend how its users can engage in the process of articulation outlined by Laclau and Mouffe. After all, how can a coherent *we* emerge out of such a mercurial environment, where users cannot know who they are communicating with? Equally, how does a community that privileges dissensus agree on which *they* to antagonize? However, despite these barriers, 4chan users have successfully articulated a common subject position vis a vis the nature and future of the internet. The question thus becomes ‘how?’, and the answer, I believe lies in the community’s use of humour.

6.5.2 Jasper & Gray

James Jasper’s work on social movements can help us to understand the political efficacy of humour and how it can be used to articulate. In particular, Jasper (2007) identifies humour as a “carrier of meaning” in protests:

Jokes, gossip, rumors, and other comments affect the reputations of players in strategic engagement and thus their ability to act. In face-to-face settings, these can be useful weapons of those with few other capacities, depending heavily on shared understandings that allow a great deal of meaning to remain implicit. But the same materials can also be broadcast to more anonymous audiences, not only through broadcast media but also via graffiti, cartoons, and so on. They are rarely full programs for action, but they have an epideictic impact on the moral sensibilities of

audiences. They shape common sense about the world and the players operating in it. Even obscenities can play a role like this. (p. 73)

Jasper's insight that humour can be used to unite 'anonymous audiences' and shape their 'moral sensibilities' is important for our understanding of 4chan. As we've seen above, it is through the circulation of humorous memes and behaviours that users construct a shared subject position. These memes, and the humour contained in them are what allow users to construct a logic of equivalence.

4chan's preoccupation with the lulz has also served a significant articulatory function.

Users often appear to participate in political acts because they find them hilarious, or enjoy the thrill of the disruption. They thus engage politically but also avoid partaking in serious business. In their analysis of Project Chanology, Underwood and Welser (2011) refer to this as "doing the right thing for fun." However, as their focus lies outside of 4chan, Underwood and Welser neglect to note that during Chanology, the lulz brought together two oppositional forces within the site's subculture: the lulzfags and the moralfags. The former believe the pursuit of lulz should be at the top of 4chan's agenda, while the latter "want to harness the power of Anonymous One towards good works in place of lulz" ("Moralfags," 2012). Both sides were able to find common ground in the fight against Scientology, evidenced by Anonymous' declaration to destroy the church "for the good of [its] followers, for the good of mankind *and for our own enjoyment*" ("Message to Scientology," 2008, emphasis mine). The unity between the two groups resulted in protest tactics that alternated between peaceful demonstrations and more absurd actions such as Operation Slickpubes, where a young Anonymous member covered in petroleum jelly and shaved pubic hair accosted people inside of New York's Scientology Centre (Dibbell, 2009).

Similarly, humour is also a means for creating logics of difference. In his book, *Watching with The Simpsons*, Jonathan Gray (2006) notes that “comedy sees us laugh *at* something or someone, and thus it is fundamentally transitive, aiming itself at some other site” (p. 104). As a result, Gray claims that “comedy is perhaps best understood as setting up inside and outside positions” and that this is what renders it “politically potent” (p. 74). In order to comprehend a joke, one must first grasp the necessary reference points. However, there will always be those who fail to do so, who do not ‘get the joke,’ and there will also be those at whom the joke is aimed.

Although still problematic, 4chan’s penchant for offensive, politically incorrect speech and obscene or grotesque images becomes meaningful when considered through this lens. As we have seen with OP is a fag there is a certain ambivalence about how one should interpret this content. When discussing the role of obscenity on /b/ with users, comments often suggested the use of hate speech and other offensive expressions was performative:

Anonymous 01/17/11(Mon)13:30:19 No.302978116

Once upon a time, /b/ was filled with intelligent people pretending to be retards. One of the ways they pretended to be retarded was with racist threads.

Anonymous 02/08/11(Tue)21:27:22 No.308091973

People are just playing a role here. I’m more racist on /b than in real life

Anonymous 02/08/11(Tue)23:41:51 No.308124411

Personally, I think that the racism here is healthy, because A) 99.99999% of it is a joke, and B) it’s taking the p[iss]

Coleman (2012) argues that through this penchant for obscenity, 4chan users are commenting on the “massification of the internet” and attempting to keep mainstream users from colonizing their corner of the web. She believes “their spectacle works in part as a virtual fence adorned with a sign bearing the following message: ‘KEEP THE (HELL) OUT OF HERE, this is our

Homeland” (p. 113). At least one user I encountered seemed to confirm Coleman’s interpretation:

Anonymous 01/02/11(Sun)22:48:52 No.299568223
>>299551584

We post gore and other vile things for a very good reason: To make unaware, uneducated, unexperienced noobs like you go away and not come back. It’s always worked. It will continue to work.

If this user is correct, then the circulation of offensive or shocking content on 4chan helps construct the double logic of equivalence and difference necessary for articulation. Those who can tolerate such content, or accept it as the price of real anonymity, occupy the inside position, while those who are offended by it are antagonized and excluded.

Finally, 4chan users and members of Anonymous frequently position themselves as a counterpoint to all that is “unfunny” on the internet. Most recently, a high-profile member of Anonymous known as Topiary was eulogized by the community following his arrest by Scotland Yard. An excerpt from the eulogy, which was uploaded to the anonymous collaborative writing site Pastebin.com, contrasts Topiary with his enemies:

He refused to accept vice in exchange for his lulz, or to submit and be humiliated by the misguided and the receivers of the wrath of Sec, who have been stricken by disgrace and misery. Topiary faced the lulz with lulz, force with force, and accepted to challenge the supercilious throngs that came out arrogantly and ostentatiously with their machinery, gear, d0x, *and lack of humor.* (emphasis mine)

A second example can be found in *Encyclopedia Dramatica*’s description of the white supremacist message board known as Stormfront. Although ED is often accused of being racist¹⁹, the site’s contributors harbour no sympathies towards the Stormfront community. ED proclaims Stormfront to be nothing but “pure redneck hatred” and offers suggestions for how to troll the

¹⁹ In 2010, Google agreed to remove ED’s entry for “Aboriginal” from Australian search results after the country’s government claimed the site was in violation of its Racial Discrimination Act (“Encyclopedia Dramatica”, 2011).

community, including a directive to “link them to gay porn sites (preferably interracial gay porn)” (“Stormfront,” 2012). ED users also make an important distinction between the spectacular and polysemic forms of discrimination on their site and the genuine racism that circulates on Stormfront, asking “how is it that ED can be racist and hilarious while this place is racist and unfunny?” (“Stormfront,” 2012).

6.5.3 Kelty

Christopher Kelty’s (2008) *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* is an anthropological inquiry into the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement. Drawing on ethnographic research that moves from an online healthcare company in Boston to media labs in Berlin to young entrepreneurs in India, Kelty outlines a constellation of practices and ideologies which unite hackers, geeks, lawyers, and software programmers under the banner of FOSS. In addition to his thick description of the FOSS movement, Kelty (2005 & 2008) makes a significant contribution to discussions of public spheres by imagining the FOSS community as a “recursive public,” a public organized around the ability to create, modify, and maintain the infrastructure that allows for its existence. The theme of recursiveness allows Kelty (2005) to recast the creation and circulation of free software as an intervention into the social imaginary of the internet—a kind of “argument by technology” (p. 186).

Kelty’s work is useful in understanding 4chan in a number of ways. Firstly, Kelty (2005) conceives of the internet as a contest: “It is neither stable nor single but is constantly being rewritten and recompiled according to diverse, partially shared, shifting, and incomplete objectives, not only by individuals but also by corporations, governments, and universities” (p. 185). The recent protests against the *Stop Online Piracy Act* (SOPA) in the United States attest to

how the internet has increasingly become not only the terrain of struggle, but also the very stakes of the contest. This is echoed by Yang (2009) who notes that media technologies become stakes of contention precisely because contentious expressions are often mediated. This notion is helpful in framing the significance of 4chan because its political efficacy can be located not only in the protests carried out under the Anonymous banner, but also in the way users circulate a counter-discourse about what the internet is and how it should relate to the offline world.

Secondly, the 4chan community is highly recursive. As I've noted, participants revel in discussing and debating the significance of their culture itself and its place on the medium which enables it. Various users have meticulously documented the cultural norms and history of the subculture on the *Encyclopedia Dramatica* wiki, and countless self-referential image macros²⁰ and memes can be found circulating both on and off 4chan. And while the bulk of participants do not perform technical interventions in the same manner as FOSS advocates—the exception being those members with sophisticated knowledge of computer networks and hacking—they are nevertheless strongly concerned with the maintenance of their means of association. As Auerbach (2012) observes, many of the protests which emerged out of 4chan are reactionary: “participants want to be. . . left alone and allowed to thrive, and they want the principles of the culture they've created to be defended” (p. 2).

6.5 Instrumentalizing: Operation Black Rage

“Implicit in these very technological mergers which created the Internet, there are immediate, pressing, practical imperatives for the official world to restore the hierarchical order. If the Net is to be a prime electronic marketplace and disseminator of persuasive sales promotion for small businesses and powerful interest groups. . . it is taken as essential that none of the potential customers or audiences be put off by their moralistic or hygienic concerns about the freedom of the internet from ‘impurity.’”

- Donald Theall (1999)

²⁰ Figure 10

To illustrate how carnivalesque humour and articulation are configured on 4chan, this final section offers a thick description of a particular mobilization which occurred during my ethnography. In the past, 4chan has been a staging ground for a number of protests against online censorship and enclosure: 4chan was one of the first online communities to join the protests against SOPA, and in 2010, users participated in both the Operation Payback protests in support of Wikileaks, as well as a series of denial-of-service attacks against the Australian government's attempts to censor the national internet ("Operation Titstorm," 2012); even Project Chanology began in response to the Church of Scientology's attempt to censor videos of Tom Cruise that had been leaked to various websites (Coleman, 2008). While these activities are perhaps exemplary manifestations of 4chan's nascent politics, the example offered below is much smaller in scope and scale. The reason for this is twofold: I want to offer an example that occurred during my observation, and also to reinforce that 4chan's political orientation towards the internet is present at the level of the everyday, and not just during a few spectacular eruptions.

In November 2010, the American clothing chain Hot Topic began selling shirts adorned with images of Rage Guy, a popular internet meme which began in 4chan in 2008 ("Rage Guy," 2012). In general, 4chan users oppose the co-option of internet culture and in response they launched Operation Black Rage²¹. They created racist incarnations of the meme²², proliferated them online and forwarded them to news outlets so as to suggest that Hot Topic had appropriated an example of 4chan's prejudice. The initial call to action was posted to /b/ on November 17 and declared that "if this is allowed to continue the it will only be a matter of time until /b/ starts getting raped of every meme and turned into the next I Can Has Cheezburger," a site which has

21 Figure 11

22 Figure 12

popularized and profited from the LOLCat phenomenon. Although a number of users were sympathetic to this idea, there was no clear consensus as to how to react:

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:20:30 No.287980XXX

>>287980266

I just don't see what the problem is. memes spread around the internet and become popular. that's what they do. sucks for the person who created it but who the fuck cares? you goddamn idiots need a life.

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:23:53 No.287981XXX

>>287980684

no, you are exactly what /b/ isn't. the memes /b/ creates aren't truly meant to be spread around the internet. sites like reddit and knowyourmeme rip off of our shit and, in the case of knowyourmeme, reap the profits.

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:22:38 No.287981XXX

>>287980684

but they selling out internet culture.

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:27:05 No.287982XXX

File1290036425.jpg-(2 KB, 149x158, lookinatsumchikun.jpg)

it's time someone put these corporate shitsuckers in their goddamned place. They want /b/, they want internet culture, they can have all the internet culture they want. Anarchistically, and fully fucking lulzworthy. I know I'll be laughing my fucking ass off when I see "hot topic is racist!" spewing from the rappers, major news outlets, etc.

However, the general sentiment was that, regardless of one's position, Hot Topic should be trolled for the lulz:

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:18:14 No.287980XXX

>>287980057

For the lulz, not the stupid meme.

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:21:25 No.287980XXX

this shit could turn into the funniest news story before the end of the year!

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:27:49 No.287982XXX

Hey, faggots, do it for the LULZ.

do it for the LULZ

Anonymous 11/17/10(Wed)18:33:03 No.287983XXX
>>287981601

I second this. Fuck the memes, I wanna troll Hot Topic PURELY for the lulz I get from it.

Ultimately, the operation went forward, and garnered enough traction within the community to be successful. After being notified of the racist memes, Hot Topic withdrew the shirt from its shelves, stating “now that the character represents racism because of these unknown creators, we will no longer be selling it” (“Race Guy,” 2012). The following day, /b/ was awash in threads celebrating the “epic win,” and the victory remains a point of pride for many users:

Anonymous 11/28/10(Sun)18:01:52 No.290689XXX
The entire internet knows not to fuck with us! We take down sites in a matter of minutes, we screw with game servers.. Hell, we’ve gotten Hot Topic to pull a shirt.

This minor act of protest reinforces a number of claims I’ve made about 4chan’s culture. It illustrates the articulatory function of the lulz, for it allowed users to “do the right thing for fun” (Underwood and Welser, 2011) and constructs a clear antagonism between the “anarchistic and fully fucking lulzworthy” culture of 4chan and the corporate seriousness of Hot Topic. As well, much of the humour of Operation Black Rage stemmed from the play between inside and outside positions, as users relied on Hot Topic not being familiar enough with the Rage Guy meme to know that it is not inherently racist. The motivations behind the operation also attest to users’ desires to maintain a separation between online and offline; although users did express disdain for other online communities which traffic in 4chan memes, they seldom conduct highly organized raids against them. In other words, 4chan memes circulating around the internet do not provoke the same reaction as a meme made corporeal in the form of a shirt.

Lastly, Operation Black Rage shows that users are aware of how linguistic excess and politically incorrect spectacle are employed by 4channers in a tactical fashion. In this case, the offensive spectacle of racism was used to assert ownership over their culture and prevent it from being commodified. An important correlate to this is that users maintain the polysemic and carnivalesque character of 4chan by denying entry to the forces of capital. The site's content prevents it from attracting any significant advertising revenue (Poole, 2009), and actions that can be construed as an attempt to sanitize 4chan are often met with hostility and, of course, mockery:

Anonymous 04/10/11(Sun)13:20:59 No.321742193

You are now aware that m00t has ordered mods to ban anyone who says anything racist. *I'm guessing he's trying to appeal to sponsors.* (emphasis mine)

Users clearly feel that it is not possible to commoditize internet culture without ruining it; even the Black Rage poster intimated that “/b/ will die” if Hot Topic is allowed to render the creative productions of 4chan into something both palatable and profitable.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper set out to reveal the nascent politics of 4chan's subculture. I have argued that while many of the activities which occurs on the site may seem incoherent, chaotic, or even socially regressive, they also represent an innovative strategy for critiquing the enclosure of digital space and the shift towards persistent identity online. Drawing on a range of theorists, from Bakhtin to Laclau and Mouffe, I have offered a glimpse into the way members of 4chan cultivate a shared subject position through common understandings of jokes, satire and offensive content. I have also described how that subject position constructs an antagonism vis a vis the dominant norms of social media. This demonstrates that, while seldom leading to organized political actions, participation on 4chan can nonetheless be deemed political in the sense of

maintaining a general, counter-hegemonic orientation towards the internet. Through participation on 4chan, users form an alternative imagined community that defies the “official” order of Facebook and Google; on 4chan, anonymity is a virtue, not a vice, and the internet is most certainly not serious business.

From a broader perspective, I have used 4chan as a way of highlighting the shortcomings of approaches to internet-mediated political communication that either impose hegemonic or normative expectations onto online speech—what I referred to earlier as a Habermasian approach—or fail to account the distinction between online and offline. 4chan both exemplifies and extols the counter-argument to this method; the site’s success at articulating a politics vis a vis the internet is indicative of the efficacy that can be found outside of purely rational frameworks, while that same orientation constructs the internet as a space of ambivalence, dissensus, debauchery and polyphony. For those who would study *these* aspects of online culture, or the spaces where they proliferate, I have suggested Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque as a starting point, for it is better able to account for and acknowledge the everyday reality of the internet and the multiple forms of political speech which reside on it. Viewing political activity on the internet through the lens of the carnival can also help us understand how, as agents configured in a mediated, digital network, internet users are constantly generating new modes of communication, which then add new layers of meaning to the discourses invoked.

That said, any interpretation can be stretched too far, and I am wary of simply replacing naively utopic discussions of the internet’s democratic potential with an equally utopic celebration of its carnivalesque character. Bakhtin has been criticized, by Morson and Emerson

(1990) for example, for essentializing the carnivalesque as inherently liberatory, and it is entirely possible that 4chan's online carnival is more noise than signal. In this regard, I side with Stallybrass and White (1986) who believe carnival is "analytically powerful in the study of ideological repertoires and cultural practices" (p. 26), but insist that it only becomes subversive "in the presence of a sharpened political antagonism" (p. 14). As I have argued above, the current moment is one where online anonymity is portrayed as anathema to both civil discourse and national security, where the once-lauded distinction between online and offline identity is being eroded, where personal information is increasingly commoditized, and where governments across the world are seeking increased powers to surveil and censor the internet. In the face of such an extensive hegemonic articulation, 4chan remains, in the words of Coleman (2011), "an oasis of anonymity in a desert of bottom-up self-revelation and top-down surveillance."

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Figure 2: An example of a LOLCat.

Appendix

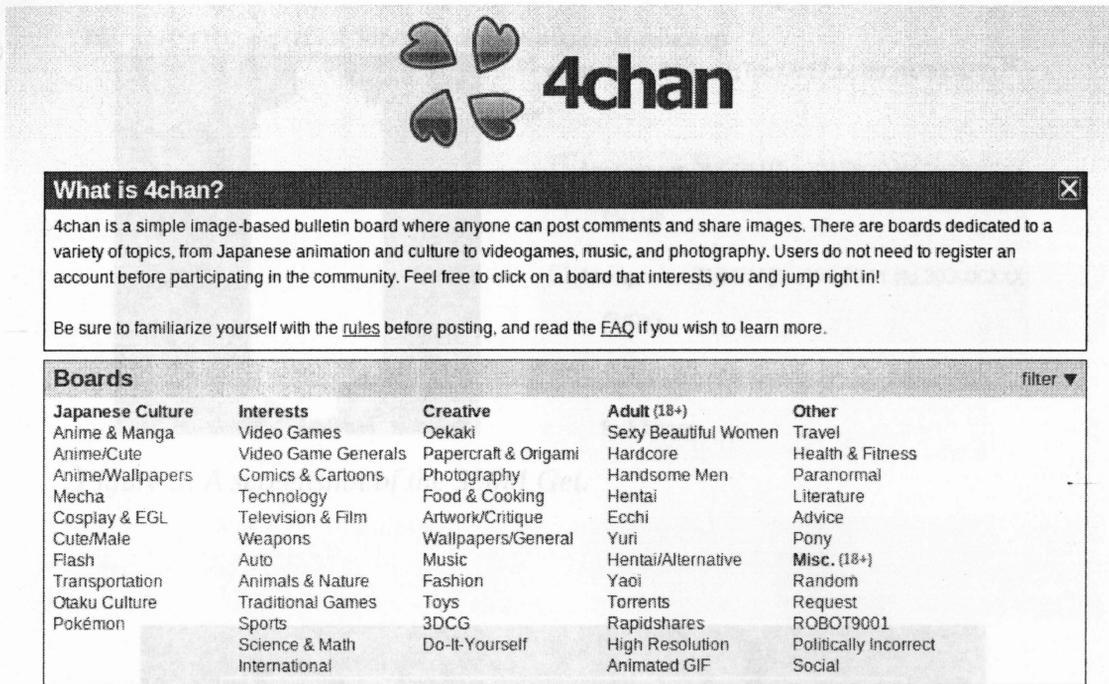


Figure 1: A screenshot of the front page of 4chan.org.

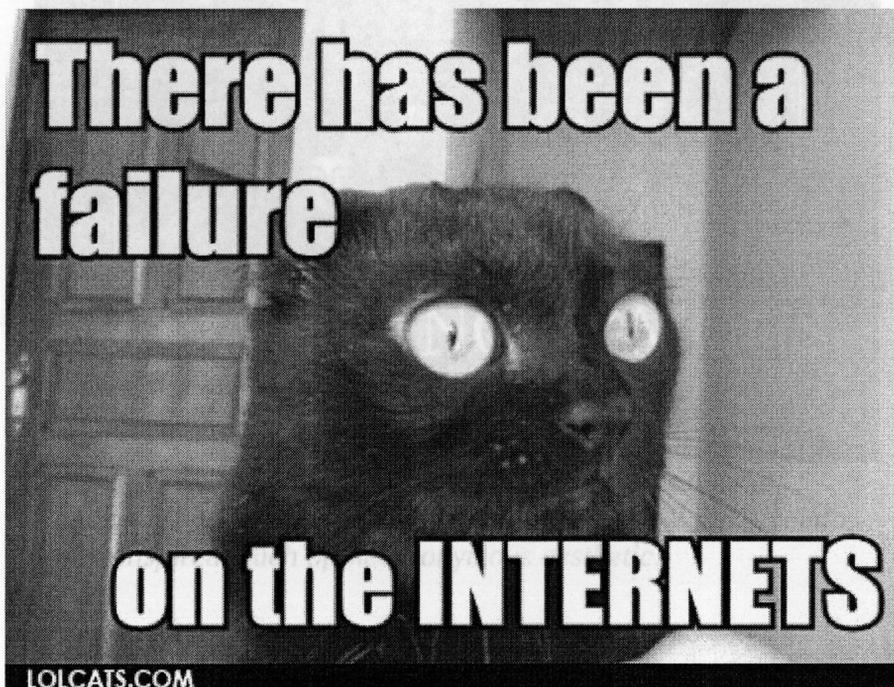


Figure 2: An example of a LOLCat.

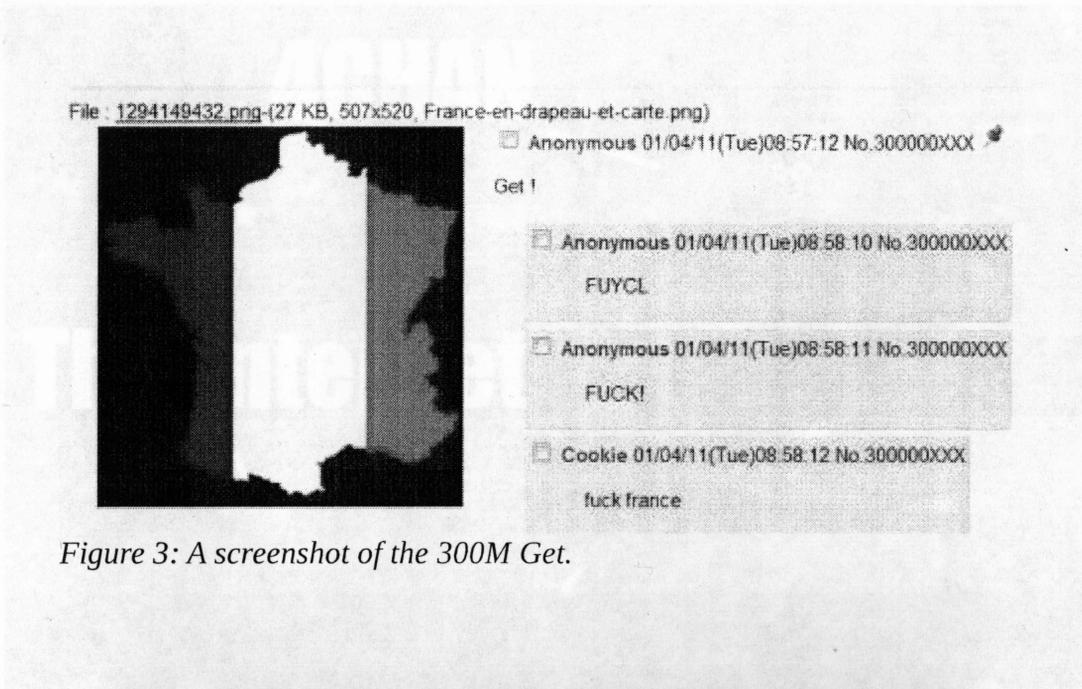


Figure 3: A screenshot of the 300M Get.



Figure 4: An image macro demonstrating the mass noun of Anonymous and featuring an image from the film V for Vendetta, which inspired much of the Anonymous aesthetic.

Figure 5: An image macro featuring the popular misspelling "for teh hiltz."



Figure 5: An example of the "4chan vs. the Internet" meme. "OP is a fag" posts on /b/.



Figure 6: An image macro featuring the popular misspelling "for teh lulz." LOLCat incarnation of the Serious Business meme.



Figure 9: A derogatory image macro featuring *Black Rag* Parry Aftab.

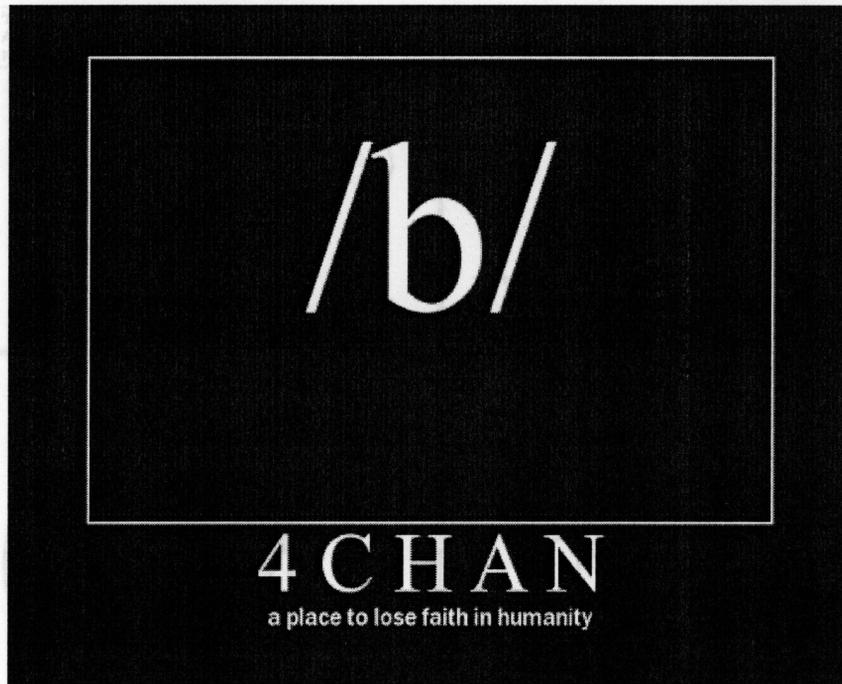


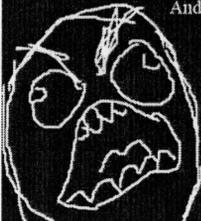
Figure 10: An example of a self-referential meme encountered during my ethnography.

OPERATION: BLACK RAGE

The corporate slut that is Hot Topic has now decided that memes are to be the latest 'cool' thing amongst 13 year old emo consumer whores, and so are now selling FFFUUUUUUU t-shirts.

This is only the beginning, if this is allowed to continue then it'll only be a matter of time until /b/ starts getting raped of every meme to be turned into the next I Can Has Cheezburger?

And before long? /b/ will die.



HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

.FFFUUUUUUU is now a racist meme. Make as many racist rage comics as you can.

.Start sending them to sensationalist news outlets as an example of the disgusting racism of Hot Topic.

.Encourage a boycott of Hot Topic until they are forced to remove the t-shirt from the shelves.

.SUCCESS! Everyone learns a valuable lesson, stays the [redacted] away from trying to sell memes.

Faux News might be a good place to start:
Newsroom: newsmanager@foxnews.com
Non-US: FOXaroundtheworld@foxnews.com
Phone: 1-888-369-4762

Never forgive. Never forget...

Figure 11: The original image which sparked Operation Black Rage.

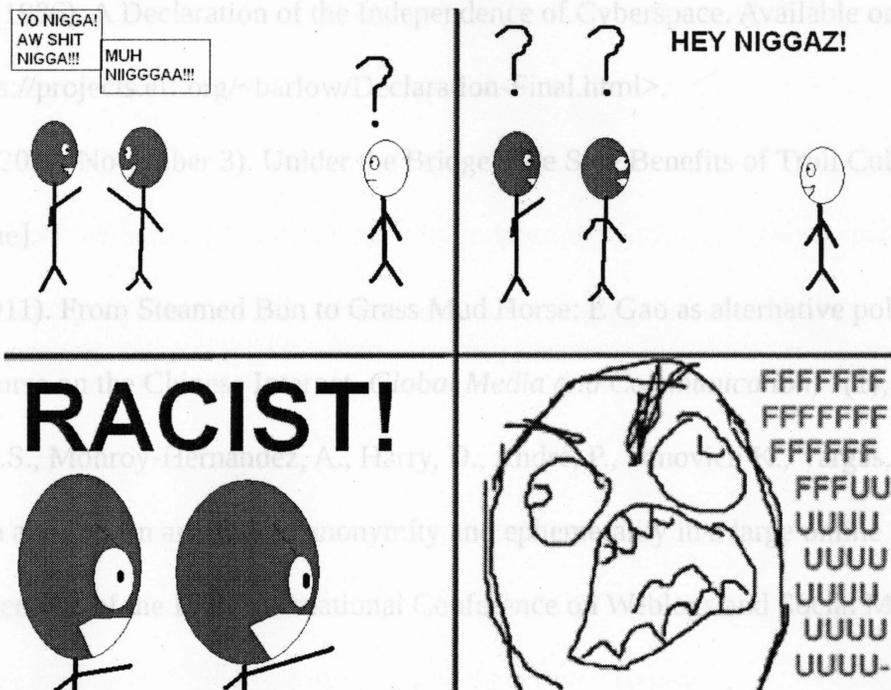


Figure 12: A racist version of the Rage Guy meme created for Operation Black Rage.

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