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Redpilling Normies: An Ethnography of Alt-Right 4chan Discourse

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**Redpilling Normies: An Ethnography of Alt-
Right 4chan Discourse**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Anthropology

and

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Departmental Honors

Emily Marie Paff

May 6th, 2022

Content Warning

Users on /pol/ regularly utilize language and images that are antisemitic, racist, misogynistic, and/or homophobic. While I as a researcher do not support the use of this language nor do I repeat it in my writing outside of citing users, it plays a central role in the way this community functions. Therefore, editing it or leaving it out would make for an incomplete analysis.

Introduction

One day in early spring of 2021 I logged off of a zoom meeting, got in bed, opened a new tab, and googled 4chan. I clicked on 4chan.org and was greeted by a banner at the top of the webpage titled “What is 4chan?” and a list of boards broken up into categories: Japanese culture, video games, interests, creative, other, miscellaneous (NSFW), adult (NSFW). According to the banner at the top:

4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. There are boards dedicated to a variety of topics, from Japanese animation and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register an account before participating in the community. Feel free to click on a board below that interests you and jump right in!

I had never been on 4chan before but was considering including it in my senior thesis and realized I should probably check it out before committing to the idea. At the time my project was going to be about hate groups in digital spaces and I did not know it at the time, but what I found on 4chan would become the entirety of my project. I then navigated my way to the miscellaneous section and clicked on the politically incorrect (/pol/) board because from what I understood that’s where you are bound to find alt-right messaging and Nazi stuff. I then read and accepted the disclaimer below and was thrust into the world of /pol/ for the first time.

To access this section of 4chan (the "website"), you understand and agree to the following:

1. The content of this website is for mature audiences only and may not be suitable for minors. If you are a minor or it is illegal for you to access mature images and language, do not proceed.
2. This website is presented to you AS IS, with no warranty, express or implied. By clicking "I Agree," you agree not to hold 4chan responsible for any damages from your use of the website, and you understand that the content posted is not owned or generated by 4chan, but rather by 4chan's users.
3. As a condition of using this website, you agree to comply with the "Rules" of 4chan, which are also linked on the home page. Please read the Rules carefully, because they are important.

I can best describe that first experience on /pol/ as trying to follow a conversation happening next to you, but it is only half in your native language and there are 25 people screaming obscenities from across the room for some reason. One second you think are reading a normal post about current events in politics (like updated covid measures or diplomacy) but somewhere along the line the thread devolves into blatant antisemitism, racism, or misogyny; the replies to posts are filled with bizarre memes and language that is technically English but does not make sense. The format of 4chan makes scrolling through /pol/ a chaotic and mildly disorienting experience. Each post has several things running across the top of it which include a post title, an anonymous ID number, a flag that is supposed to represent the country of origin (but confederate, Gadsden, and Nazi flags are also often used), a date and time of post, and a unique post number that serves as

a way to identify posts from one another and allows for users to reply to one another.¹ Many posts also have memes or images on the left-hand side. Individual posts and threads are not clearly separated out from one another, and posts are of myriad sizes depending on the content, therefore it is difficult to distinguish which posts go together and which are meant to stand alone.

Reading through /pol/ for the first time, I could understand the individual words of many posts but when put together in a sentence it might as well have been in a different language. Each post was filled with slang terms that I either was only vaguely familiar with or did not understand at all. I had never encountered that many obscenities and slurs in such a short amount of time. Some of the posts started out seemingly calm but the replies quickly devolved into incomprehensible chaos. The thing that has stuck with me most from that first experience on 4chan was the wildly antisemitic and misogynistic memes. In all, I probably spent less than 10 minutes scrolling through /pol/ and then didn't touch it again for months.

4chan was created by Christopher Poole, also known by the pseudonym "moot," in 2004 at the age of 15 as a place to discuss Japanese anime and Otaku culture. In a 2010 interview for the New York Times, Poole stated, "I used to use the nickname 'Moo' as a moniker online, and then I turned into 'Moot' for fun, which I didn't even realize was a real word at the time" (Bilton). The board largely took inspiration from a popular Japanese forum called Futaba Channel. Since its inception, 4chan has grown to be a place for discussion of much more than anime and there are now over 60 different discussion boards (Bernstein et al., 2011). Unlike other forums or social media platforms, 4chan has

¹ The Gadsden flag is commonly associated with anti-government movements, militias, and patriots (High Country News).

a threshold for how much content can be on the site. According to 4chan's FAQ section, most boards have a limit of 10 pages and content can only be "bumped," or pushed to the top of the board through getting engagement a certain number of times (varies board to board) before it inevitably descends to the bottom of the board and gets removed.

The way content is regularly deleted based on a lack of engagement in order to make room for new content creates an environment where users are constantly battling for attention. In a 2011 study of 4chan's /b/ (random) board, Bernstein et al found that the median life of a thread was just 3.9 minutes. The amount of engagement on a post is the primary determining factor of its lifespan on 4chan, therefore, users attempt to post content that will garner a lot of engagement. Members use egregious language and perspectives in hopes that their posts will win the constant battle for attention. That being said the same study found that 43% of posts receive no replies at all and thus have a very short lifespan. The constant offloading of posts adds to the chaotic nature of the platform as users are constantly fighting for space and trying to take in the content before it disappears.

Today people spend a substantial portion of their lives online. Whether they view their time online as a simple extension of their in-person life or view it as a unique virtual space separate from the rest of their life, individuals create meaning in unique and personal ways through the internet. The internet serves as a free space where groups can form an institutional anchor and craft a collective identity in an environment separate from non-followers (Polleta 1999; Polleta & Jasper, 2001). In the 21st century, recognizing how the internet functions in various spaces is vital to understanding how political movements operate on the internet as well as if and how online behavior

translates to real life. This project seeks to examine alt-right behavior on 4chan to better comprehend it because understanding the alt-right is a critical step to effectively counteracting the movement and the hate they propagate.

The alt-right has an ever-growing presence in the American political and cultural landscape. Through the proliferation of the internet, accessing far-right ideology and forming communities around it has become increasingly easy. The Alternative Right, coined by Richard Spencer in 2008 and now colloquially known as the alt-right, is a formally disjointed yet socially and ideologically connected group of far-right political extremists tied together by a shared interest in white identity and the preservation of western civilization (Southern Poverty Law Center, alt-right). Due to its decentralized nature, the validity of the group is often ignored. However, the alt-right and its many subgroups are responsible for cultivating a culture of hate that expands past their insular group and into the real world. The events of January 6th, 2021 are just one of many examples of how the alt-right and its behavior online have reshaped our modern political landscape. Rather than discrediting this group and its members as crazy people who have disappeared down the rabbit hole, it is critical to understand the real human draw that comes from joining the alt-right and why individuals might turn to them as opposed to another group for a sense of group identity. It is important to do so, not so we can sympathize with their ideology, but rather so we can accurately work to disempower them and their antisemitic, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic views.

Although 4chan is accessible to anyone who has access to the internet, its anonymous nature allows it to operate as a pseudo-private space where discussions about group beliefs and strategies take place. Because of the nature of the platform, participants

are only fully aware of the true meaning of their own posts which makes 4chan a unique site for a virtual ethnography. This is largely due to the existence of Poe's Law which asserts that it is impossible to know if someone is being sincere or using parody in online discourse without the existence of explicit signifiers like emojis (Aikin, 2013). Thus, while I can infer meaning from posts, the true intention remains hidden from both myself and every other user on /pol/. I, like every other user, know nothing about the individuals behind each post. There is no way to know their age, race, where they are from, how much time they spend on the platform, how often they post or their true intentions behind posting. These limitations to gaining a holistic understanding of the context surrounding posts complicate a more traditional approach to ethnography, which would entail a deep understanding of participants in the community, extensive participant observation, and detailed interviews.

These apparent limitations, however, do not inhibit the ability to do meaningful research in this space. Ethnography as a discipline is interested in exploring how people use systems to create meaning and solve problems regardless of the form that that system takes (Bolstorff et al, 2012). This project engages in what will I call "partial" participant observation as I examine a specific discourse on 4chan rather than 4chan discourse as a whole and did not participate in the lives of those who spend time on 4chan as a more traditional ethnographer would. However, that does not make this ethnography any less real. As Tom Bolstorff discusses in his book *Coming of Age in Second Life*, one should study virtual worlds "in their own terms" so we can best highlight how virtual spaces are profoundly human. In essence, virtual worlds are no less real because they are virtual. Virtual experiences are a unique and valued subset of human experiences (2008). The

way I am conducting ethnography—not knowing the identity of users—matches the true user experience on 4chan. Now more than ever individuals are frequenting the internet and blurring the boundaries between their online and virtual lives. According to the Pew Research Center over 80% of adults ages 18-49 use at least one social media site (2022). Thus, studying how people operate online and modifying the traditional methods of ethnography to reflect the virtual environment is essential for anthropology in the modern age.

For this research project, I have chosen to center my methodology on alt-right redpill discourse as redpilling is the central recruitment strategy for the alt-right and many other tangentially related groups. But that begs the question: What is a redpill, and what is redpilling? Redpilling is a term derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where the main character Neo has the option to take the red pill, which will awaken him to the true reality of the future, or take the blue pill, which will allow him to continue living in ignorance. The term was originally adopted by a contemporary group of antifeminists, otherwise known as the manosphere movement, as a term meaning “the truth” (Ganesh, 2018; Nagel, 2017; Wendling, 2018). According to Alexandra Stern a Professor of History and American culture at the University of Michigan, “In the manosphere swallowing the red pill meant not only the crowning of masculinity but the erasure and evisceration of feminism and its beguiling companions of liberalism, leftism, and ‘cultural Marxism’” (2019).

The term evolved due to #gamergate and the rise of Donald Trump during the 2016 election cycle and has been adopted by many different groups, including neo-Nazis, antisemites, Islamaphobes, libertarians, atheists, Christians, and race-realists, who

comprise the modern alt-right. Despite the expansion of its use, the notion of truth is still central (Ganesh 2018). When used as a noun a redpill is a piece of alt-right ideology, and when used as a verb it becomes a slang term for the recruitment process. Because of its dualistic nature, the term serves as a unique point of study. Redpilling “normies”—a slang term for non-members—is the alt-right's primary avenue for member recruitment. In order to get new members to join, existing members must redpill—or educate—them on alt-right ideology to pull them in. To an outsider, the method of redpilling individuals may seem disjointed and random, however, my observations of redpill discourse on 4chan highlight the highly strategic and formulaic ways in which existing members reveal parts of the alt-right ideology to create the best possible environment for outsiders to “take the red pill” and join the alt-right themselves.

The central research question for this project is: How do alt-right-identified individuals use 4chan to create community, cultivate a shared ideology, and develop strategies for recruiting new members? 4chan proves a useful site to explore redpill discourse because its one of the few places on the internet where we can easily access discussions of strategy and the constant (re)formulation of an alt-right ideological narrative. This exploration seeks to identify the central values of alt-right members on 4chan, how they create meaning and build community, as well as what they view as central to belonging to the alt-right. I attempt to address these through examining their discussions of how to redpill others, what they were redpilled by, and what they view as undeniable redpills. I have organized the findings of my investigation into alt-right redpill discourse on 4chan into four main areas: community building, discussions of recruitment

strategy, views of women, and the role of participation all of which I explore in the coming pages.

In the following pages, I first dive into the methodology of this research project and how my decision to conduct unobtrusive digital ethnography shaped the nature of this project. Then, I provide a more in-depth definition of the alt-right as well as discuss some of the most prolific alt-right conspiracy theories that highlight their worldview and help to give context to my data. Next, I discuss the way community building occurs /pol/ and how it is a central aspect of the platform. After that, I break down the strategy behind the redpill process followed by the role that misogyny plays in the absence of women on 4chan and how that intersects with alt-right ideology. Finally, I end with a discussion of community policing, participation, and how that impacts performance and use of language on /pol/.

Method

For this ethnography, I monitored the usage of the term “redpill” on the /pol/ board of 4chan for the first two weeks of September 2021 (1st-14th). Using the archive at <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/> I looked at over 1,900 posts that included the term redpill and took screenshots of 242 posts to create a sample that was representative of the whole. During the data collection process, I used date filters on archive4plebs to look at all the posts that used the term redpill the day prior which was roughly 120-150 posts a day. The posts that I screenshotted were named to better represent the content of the screenshot and put into Zotero. After data collection, I open-coded my sample by adding tags to each screenshot in Zotero in order to identify themes and trends within the board. Tagging

screenshots not only allowed me to see themes between the posts that shared a tag but also see what tags were often being used together.

I chose to only look at the term “redpill” rather than it and other forms of the word like “redpilled” and “redpilling” to keep my sample size manageable. However, further research into other forms of the term and their usage might be useful in building upon my findings. The quantitative information surrounding the frequency of use of the term redpill is significant, but the quantitative information alone reveals nothing more than the fact that “redpill” is used on 4chan nearly 1,000 a week on average. Therefore, my analysis centers on the qualitative nature of the posts that use the term to investigate how and what things are being discussed. In *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a handbook of method* the authors discuss the interconnected relationship between quantitative and qualitative data and state, “Numbers are inescapably *about something*, and that something is necessarily expressed in language” (Boellstorff et al., 2021; 35). The language surrounding redpill discourse sits at the center of my analysis as both what individuals believe will redpill people and the language they use to discuss those topics reveal a great deal about the alt-right.

Due to the nature of this research project, and virtual ethnography as a whole, I do not know my participants in an intimate capacity as one might in a traditional ethnography. There is no way of knowing their actual identities IRL (“in real life”), and I also can’t build an understanding of their perspectives or worldview by aggregating their posts because all posts are anonymous. Thus, they cannot be collected and connected to a creator as is true on other social media platforms. In some capacities, this may be seen as a disadvantage as it is antithetical to the traditional understanding of ethnography as a

research method. However, I argue this has allowed me to gain deeper insights than if I had pursued either a virtual ethnography where participants might have been identifiable or ethnography in a more traditional sense.

This ethnography relies on “found data” as described by Christine Hine and thus is a form of unobtrusive ethnography. Found data, unlike data from traditional interviews and observation, is preexisting and easily accessible. Due to the politically charged nature of the project, it is likely that participants would have modified their behavior had they been aware of my presence as is standard with traditional ethnography (2015). Since 4chan is completely anonymous, individuals do not filter themselves in the way they might on other platforms where they could be identified. The nature of the platform and the discussions users are having lends itself to a form of observation that is only possible through the method of unobtrusive ethnography as participants were in no way modifying their behavior due to my presence as an outsider.

At the start of this project, I witnessed the filtering of behavior firsthand when attempting to collect data about redpill discourse on Twitter. While I was able to use the same method for 4chan and Twitter the use of the term on Twitter was vastly different than on 4chan. On Twitter, instead of being used to discuss strategy and group beliefs, redpilling was mainly used in the usernames of individual users and right-wing media accounts. After collecting data on Twitter alongside my 4chan data and beginning to review it, I quickly realized that conducting an analysis of redpill discourse on Twitter was not going to be an effective way to analyze alt-right behavior on the platform and the ability to be identified and the likely presence of outsiders certainly played a role. While the alt-right is also certainly on Twitter the higher level of moderation that occurs on the

platform appears to inhibit explicit discussions around redpills and redpilling. My exploration of Twitter was thus dropped from the project, however, other avenues for research about the alt-right that focus on Twitter or other similar platforms could be highly valuable.

Although 4chan is easily accessible, the fact that it operates on a niche corner of the internet coupled with its anonymous nature allows it to operate as a seemingly private space, unlike other platforms. I was thus able to observe private thoughts, conversations, and revelations as if I was invited into a members-only space which would not have been possible with another method of ethnography. The diversity of digital media poses unique challenges for ethnographic analysis, but these challenges are far outweighed by the possibilities that digital ethnographies bring. Therefore, instead of avoiding digital ethnography, one should work to engage with the unique challenges that this form of ethnography poses (Coleman, 2010). Questions of ethics are a central aspect of conducting strong ethnography and digital ethnography is no different; many of the challenges of virtual ethnography mirror central considerations of all ethnography, just in new forms. In this particular case, virtual ethnography allowed me into a space and a social world that I would not have otherwise been able to access.

Worldview

Before conducting an in-depth analysis of redpill discourse on 4chan it is important to lay out what the alt-right believes. Because the alt-right is not an easily identifiable or united group, their worldview is one that has many layers and is constantly evolving. Understanding a culture or group's worldview is a central facet of anthropology

as a discipline. Many different scholars have come up with their own definitions of worldview, but they all essentially boil down to the way a group understands its reality. In “Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change” Paul Hiebert lays out six key functions of worldviews; they answer our unanswerable questions, provide emotional security, validate our cultural norms, help to organize our ideas and values, monitor cultural change, and provide reassurance that the world is the way we perceive it (2008). Essentially, worldviews provide a frame through which a group understands and interprets the world around them. In the case of the alt-right, being able to identify this frame allows us to better understand the conclusions that they come to and how they get there.

The alt-right separates itself from other groups through a focus on white identity, the preservation of western civilization, and support for the creation of a white ethnostate (Southern Poverty Law Center, alt-right). The alt-right’s founder Richard Spencer wanted the movement to be grounded in intellectualism and paleoconservatism in the service of a return to traditional conservative beliefs.² The alt-right rejects contemporary conservatism as they believe it is not far-right enough. Today, Richard Spencer’s original notion of the alternative right has evolved into many separate factions that are still united under those shared beliefs. In *Alt-Right Gangs: A Hazy Shade of White*, Shannon Ried an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology from the University of North Carolina and Matthew Valasik an Associate Professor of Sociology and gang scholar from Louisiana State University define alt-right gangs as, “A durable, public-oriented

² Paleoconservatism- “a stone Age-y play on ‘neoconservatism’... Paleos dislike immigration and multiculturalism. In contrast to neoconservatives, they are skeptical of free trade and foreign military adventures. They look to the past and are strict traditionalists when it comes to gender, ethnicity, race, and social order” (Wendling, 2018; 17-18).

group (both digitally and physically) whose adoption of signs and symbols of the white power movement and involvement in illegal activity are part of its group identity” (20). These groups—like the Proud Boys and Atomwaffen Division—are youth-focused movements that combine aspects of more traditional white power groups—like the Klu Klux Klan and various neo-Nazi groups—with online trolling and facets of traditional street gangs. The alt-right is unique from other hate groups because of its focus on the online world as equally valuable to group identity. Thus, it is members of these alt-right groups that are using platforms like 4chan to build out beliefs and communicate with each other.

The alt-right is unique as it is both an ideological and political movement. You can see the alt-right’s ties to the American political system through the many different conspiracy theories that have been disseminated over ten years as well as the existence of modern conservative politicians who support and perpetuate those theories. Conspiracy theories are marked by a few distinct characteristics: they are wildly broad, are believed to have existed for a long time, involve a large number of people, and are ultimately blamed on a nonspecific group of elites (Neiwart, 2020). Alt-right conspiracies are ever-evolving but can be boiled down to this: the government is controlled by deep state (likely Jewish) actors who are threatening democracy and pushing a liberal agenda to control the masses.

Abbie Richards, a self-proclaimed “TikTok disinformation and extremist researcher,” otherwise known as @tofology on TikTok, became famous for creating a conspiracy chart that broke down different conspiracies and conspiracy theories in an upside-down triangle format with tiers to depict the amount that a theory is grounded in

reality.³ These ranged from things that actually happened like COINTELPRO and big tobacco lying about cigarettes causing cancer at the bottom and alt-right conspiracies like QAnon, pizza gate, and the faking of Sandy Hook at the top. According to Richards, all of the top-tier conspiracy theories are grouped together because they have reached what she has coined “the antisemitic point of no return” and the conspiracy theories that originate in the alt-right live past that line. The conspiracies that reside past the antisemitic point of no return all have a few things in common: a good vs. evil dualism is central and the evil group is always Jewish people who control the world. These theories heavily promote age-old antisemitic tropes that Jews are greedy, evil, and have too much power (Richards, 2020) Although the alt-right does dabble in other theories that are not directly rooted in antisemitism, such as anti-vax rhetoric and 5G conspiracies, they are likely to attribute them to the Jewish elite in some way.

4chan and the /pol/ board play a major role in the creation of alt-right conspiracies. Two of the most famous alt-right conspiracy theories—Pizzagate and QAnon—have been directly linked to the activity on /pol/. Pizzagate began trending on Twitter on November 4th, 2016 and proceeded to grow in popularity over the next month. However, the origins of Pizzagate can be traced back to 4chan’s /pol/ board. Posts began appearing on 4chan in the two days before its explosion on Twitter (Tuters, 2018). The posts connected Hillary Clinton and John Podesta’s leaked emails, flight logs from Jeffrey Epstein, and two American reporters who were captured in North Korea all together through pizza (Wendling, 2018). Pizzagate appeared to be a new iteration of another narrative already present on 4chan named “orgy island,” which linked the

³ Chart can be found at <https://conspiracychart.com/>

Clintons and Jeffery Epstein together through pedophilia. The pizza narrative came out of the mention of cheese pizza in one of John Podesta's leaked emails along with other "clues" users found. The mention of cheese pizza appeared to be a clear indication of pedophilia to those on 4chan because prior to Pizzagate the term "cheese pizza" had been a code word for child pornography on the platform (Tuters, 2018). Users took all of this information and began pushing the narrative that a pizza place in Washington D.C. named Comet Ping Pong was being used as a front for a child sex trafficking ring for the political elites in D.C.

The Pizzagate narrative moved from 4chan to Twitter when a Twitter personality, "Pizza Party Ben," tweeted about Pizzagate to his thousands of followers. This began the more mainstream explosion of the theory over the next month. On November 27th, 2016, the creator of Infowars, Alex Jones, discussed Pizzagate on his radio show and urged his followers to do their own research into the phenomenon. Then, in early December Edgar Maddison Welch drove from his hometown in North Carolina to Comet Ping Pong to check it out for himself (Wendling, 2018). Welch came armed with three guns and ultimately discharged one of his weapons inside the establishment and was sentenced to four years in prison for the attempted attack (New York Times, 2017).

QAnon, like Pizzagate, also centered around a pedophile ring run by elites but this time it went global. On October 6th, 2017, Donald Trump Tweeted "the calm before the storm" and when asked what he meant he responded, "you'll see." Three weeks later, a user on 4chan nicknamed Q, claiming they had a special security clearance, began posting coded messages and private intel on the platform asserting that the remarks made by Trump were concerning the indictments handed down by Robert Mueller in late

October (Neiwart, 2020). David Neiwert, author of *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*, describes QAnon as a “Meta-conspiracy” that is “Part Pizzagate, part New World Order, and part hyper-partisan wishful thinking” (2020; 83). Essentially, followers of Q believe that there is a group of progressive elites engaging in a global pedophile ring, cannibalizing young children, and drinking their blood—all somehow in an attempt to stage a deep state coup to overthrow Donald Trump. Followers of Q believe they must engage in “the storm” which is an unspecified event where Trump will join them and arrest the Satan-worshipping cabal (Kamola, 2021; Niewart, 2020).

QAnon first gained popularity at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018 and was officially labeled a “dangerous extremist group” by the FBI in August of 2019 but grew in popularity in 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic. QAnon conspiracy theorists comprised a large group in the January 6th insurrection where Trump supporters stormed the capital in an attempt to block the certification of the 2020 presidential election results (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). During the insurrection many were seen wearing Q merchandise, chanting things connected to the group, and at least one insurrectionist went as far as to deem himself the “QAnon Shaman.” As the FBI has begun to identify and press charges against individuals for their participation in the insurrection, QAnon involvement appears to be the overwhelming factor connecting them (Rubin et al., 2021). For followers of QAnon, January 6th was Trump’s call to start the storm. Throughout the popularity of QAnon, many right-wing politicians and figureheads began both indirectly and directly supporting QAnon; many of the movement’s followers believed that Donald

Trump was sending them coded messages of support, and some even believed that Trump himself was Q.

Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, two social psychologists who study radicalization, describe forums like 4chan as a “collective myth-making platform,” where users are encouraged to do their own research, find connections, and come together to construct theories, thus allowing for the group creation of conspiracies like QAnon (2021). This collective building of theories adds a level of camaraderie which can fill the void left by the rejection they face from those close to them who repudiate the alt-right (Neiwart, 2020). The collective nature of conspiracy building on 4chan allows theories to spread like wildfire throughout the platform, all while getting more and more outlandish. While users are encouraged to do their own research and build upon existing theories, the existence of Poe’s law makes it impossible to know if a user truly believes the things they add to or claim about a theory. The anonymous nature of 4chan creates an environment where Poe’s law is constantly in play. While one user may simply be making a conjecture about an up-and-coming theory, another may take that said piece of information as complete truth. Therefore, as theories grow, users that contribute to them may themselves not believe parts of the conspiracy. However, since there is no way of knowing a user’s true intention or belief behind a post, most users likely assume anything they also agree with has already been proven to be true. Thus, the theory gets treated as true for long enough that it eventually becomes canon regardless of the original intention behind posting.

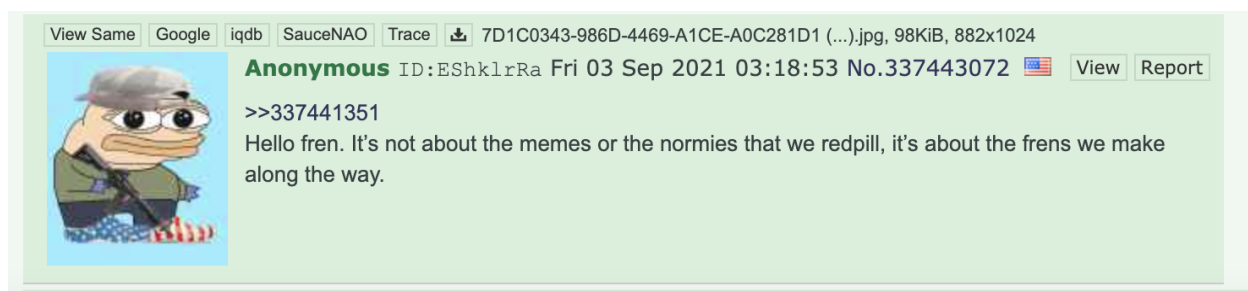
While I collected data just eight months after the January 6th insurrection, which was arguably a peak in mainstream QAnon discourse, I saw no notable mention of it in

my data. Although I have seen little to no direct mention of these specific conspiracy theories in my data, the central tenets of these theories both create a backbone for all alt-right 4chan discourse and provide a framework for the general beliefs of members of the alt-right. They thus provide valuable context for readers before diving into what I observed while collecting data. While discussions of Pizzagate and QAnon are likely still occurring in some capacity on the platform, the fact that they did not make a notable appearance in my data highlights just how fast conspiracy theories evolve on the platform and either move into the mainstream or die out completely. Although the discussion of these theories is no longer taking center stage in alt-right discourse on /pol/, the narratives that they perpetuate are central to alt-right belief. While it will take a different form, the next alt-right conspiracy to reach the mainstream will also ultimately boil down to a belief that there is a secret government ploy headed by the Jewish elite to control and silence the masses.

“It’s about the frens we make along the way”: Community Building on /pol/

Figure 1

Post Number: 337443072

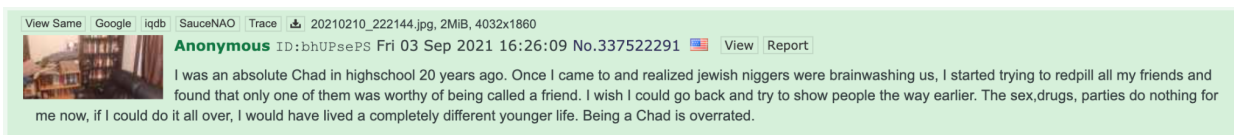


Despite the fact that 4chan is an anonymous message board, community building is a central aspect of people's experiences on the platform. 4chan can be thought of as a boundless free space that collapses physical distance thus allowing for connection not possible in the physical world (Burriss et al., 2000). On /pol/ individuals living hundreds and even thousands of miles from each other share personal stories, collect resources for redpilling others, and build out their collective beliefs through discourse. Personal storytelling is the primary way that members of /pol/ build community with each other and showcase their dedication to the movement. Whether it be a post about how long they have been a part of /pol/, a story of what redpilled them, or a story of how they have worked to redpill others, individuals on /pol/ find comfort in sharing pieces of their otherwise unseen lives outside of 4chan. Users often share narratives of struggle that center around losing loved ones as a result of joining the alt-right which serves as a bonding point between members.

The bearing of personal losses is narratively presented as a way to separate oneself from their past self: by publicly rejecting those who opposed one's transition to the alt-right, individuals are also rejecting the normie version of their past self. Personal story posts (like figure 2) discuss the loss that comes with their decision to align themselves with alt-right ideology while also reasserting that their decision was worth it. This doubling down that taking the redpill is worth any and all potential losses is a central aspect of these storytelling posts.

Figure 2

Post Number: 337522291



Participants also use personal storytelling to increase the validity of their claims on /pol/. Since users do not know anything about one another, revealing personal information can give weight to what a user is claiming and can enhance the authenticity of their word. Along with sharing stories about their journey to /pol/, users also share bits of information about redpilling others. One user wrote, “I had to Redpill my ‘We support Israel, India Israel’ best friend about the Jews. I couldn't take it anymore, at least he understood.” This post had no other context surrounding it and like the one above it, got zero replies. Although it is safe to assume that users appreciate engagement with their posts, we can also assume that garnering engagement is not the only objective. Through posting information about their experience with redpilling, users are proving their dedication to the movement both to themselves and to others on 4chan. Because of the nature of the platform, posting or engaging with existing posts is the only way one can prove they too, are a part of the movement. Therefore, posting serves as a ritual that aligns oneself with the movement even though others may not see or engage with the post.

Along with personal storytelling, more experienced participants share experiences about the redpill process in order to prepare new members for the difficulties they may encounter. Users depend on one another for support and will often share past experiences

as a way to help one another out. Newer members turn to others for advice on how they should spend their time on the platform and how to be the most effective redpill. For example, one—most likely more experienced—poster responded to another by stating, “Not now anon, I used to make long redpill threads with AMAs but I’m tired.”⁴ Here we can see how users warn others of how taxing the redpill process can be. The notion that attempting to redpill others is difficult is not limited to this one post. Repeatedly participants will warn others about how to best spend their energy or reinforce the idea that it will be hard. However, many users still highlight the fact that despite potential struggle dedicating yourself to the alt-right and redpilling others will be worth it in the end. As one poster noted,

You will waste thousands of hours and will look like a Literall [sic] retard infront [sic] of your family. You will suffer and end up as a transvestite but it will be worth it, because the knowledge you obtained is far greater than the physical stress that your body has to endure. So anon, which pill will it be?

While this user is vague about the end benefit, they are declaring that no matter what happens to you in the process, aligning yourself with the alt-right will be worth it in the end. Despite this user recounting the struggles of joining the community, and many other posts like it, individuals continue to join the alt-right community on /pol/.

Instead of being a deterrent, personal struggle is understood as a central part of alt-right group identity and the discussion of it fuels the culture of /pol/. For many, an outward story of struggle can represent one’s dedication to the ideology. Having lost

⁴ AMA- abbreviation for “ask me anything” normally used in online forums like Redditt and 4chan (Urban Dictionary)

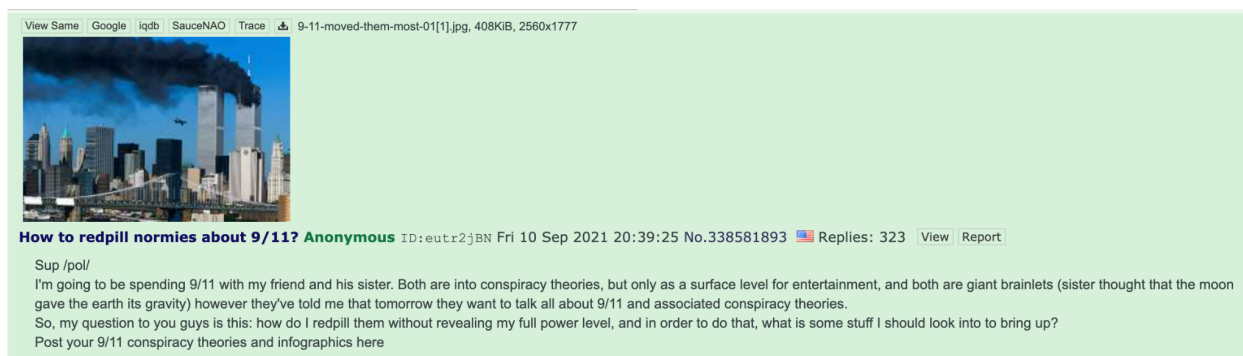
something or someone by joining the alt-right becomes a marker of one's commitment and can serve as proof of allegiance. Personal stories serve as a tool to highlight potential loss while also reaffirming that joining the alt-right was the right decision because it will ultimately pay off. Discussions of existing or potential losses become a bonding point for individuals and can help to further the us vs. them dynamics that is central to community building., In their study of the internet's role in fostering violent extremism, Gaudette et al. (2020) build upon the notion of collective identity formation from Polletta and Jasper (2001) and discuss the role that in and out-group dynamics have in creating a common enemy and fostering bonds between members. Gaudette et al. examined these dynamics on Reddit, but this strong separation of the in and out-group can also be seen in the discussion of struggle on 4chan. Discussions of struggle strengthen in-group bonds and place the blame of struggle on outsiders; the ability to successfully deal with external challenges and threats also becomes a measure by which s members of /pol/ distinguish themselves from each other.

Although it often serves as a bonding point, members must find a balance between being upfront and honest about the potential struggles and losses that come with committing to the alt-right while also reinforcing the notion that they will reap the benefits of being redpilled and thus will no longer be in the dark about the reality of society. The balance between these two aspects is vitally important because when done properly it can serve as a way to let new members know that they are going to face challenges while also reaffirming that any challenge they face is worth it because being a part of the alt-right and spreading the ideology is more important than losing aspects of their old life.

Resource sharing is a substantial aspect of redpill discourse on 4chan. Members will post links to cloud-based folders that contain a plethora of books and articles that help to educate others on alt-right ideology. Most often the resources they discuss are educational texts and materials from notable alt-right theorists. Links can vary from one piece of reading or small folders on a specific issue to massive databases on alt-right views. Often individuals will ask for others to compile resources for them on a specific topic so that they can be equipped with information to redpill others, either through directly sharing those resources with the potential member or educating themselves so they can go on to share that information with others. Below is an example of one instance the day before the anniversary of 9/11, where a user asked the community to help them redpill their family and received 323 replies.

Figure 3

Post Number: 338581893



In figure 3 the user is attempting to collect resources from other users to help redpill his friend on 9/11 since they will be together on its anniversary. Posts like this, that ask for resources or information are the most likely to generate replies (323 in the

case of figure 3), which signals a shared interest in recruiting new members and creating the alt-right ideological narrative. Also, by asking something of others in the replies members are more likely to engage with the post which is the case of most crowdsourcing efforts online. The other major form that these posts will take is when someone will post about compiling a redpill master document (master doc) asking for others to share resources that should be added. Many of these master docs are tailored to the Jewish Question (JQ) and are meant for more widespread community use unlike the one above which was created for a specific issue and a specific person. Here is an example of part of a master doc post that got 27 replies filled with links; the post also included a photo of Hitler holding a Nazi flag:

I've noticed with the recent influx of newfags from Reddit and the like that there are people thinking that the Nazi thing is just a meme, or totally at a loss of what national socialism is. Its time to rebuild the Natsoc General so we can stop having shitty slide threads saying 'guis is the hitler stuff just memes' every hour.⚡ Your one-stop-shop for every redpill known to /pol/
⚡ Thread for discussion of the Jewish Question, Race Realism, Anti-Communism, the Aryan Ideal, Traditionalism, Racial Nationalism, and Racial Identity Movements. Improve yourself, comrades, community, and folk.⁵

⁵ These symbols were used to separate out the text before and after the text within these symbols. While I am not sure the true intention of these symbols it is likely that they are meant to refer to the SS or Schutzstaffel which was the group responsible for the german police force and concentration camp system during nazi Germany (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The SS).

These posts allow individuals to actively participate in crafting the alt-right ideological narrative and prove their dedication through sharing information they have learned from others on /pol/. Active participation in alt-right digital spaces not only allows individuals to shape the movement narrative, and thus themselves, but also allows them to come to conclusions about those who oppose their behavior (Gaudette et al., 2020). Through repetition of their views, users can cement the ideological framework they use to construct their worldview and develop new theories that exist within said framework. The interactive nature of the internet allows members to strengthen their ties to a movement because they take on a level of personal responsibility for its success. Active participation on the board is thus what marks someone as a true member because they are contributing to larger discussions about group beliefs.

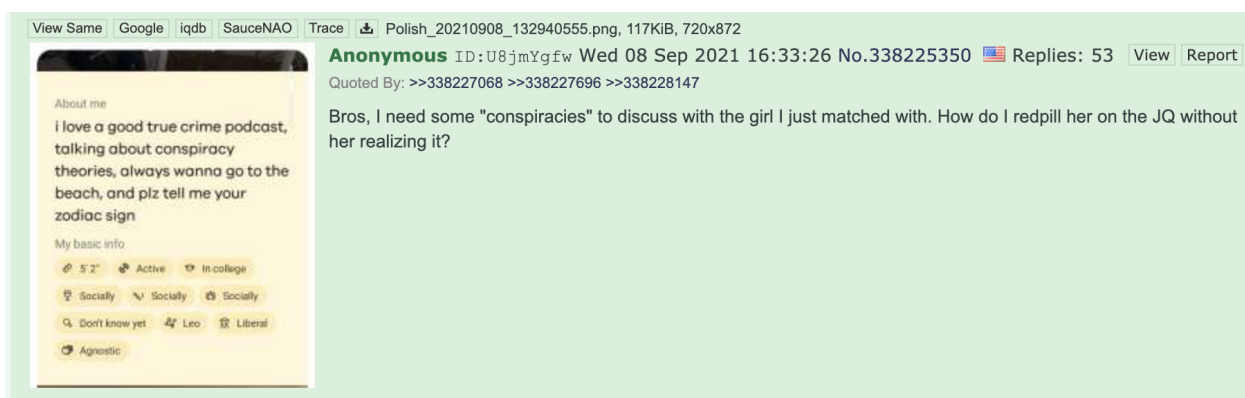
To use the words of Benedict Anderson, /pol/ can be thought of as a tool to build an “imagined community” where users create a form of “alt-right nation” predicated on their similarities with one another. Anderson defines “nation” as: “an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” Nationalism is thus the inventing of nations through the development of ideological boundaries (2006; 6). For the alt-right, /pol/ serves as a space where members create the boundaries between themselves and others, collectively building out their shared identity and the identities of those who they oppose. The anonymous, and interactive, nature of 4chan fuels the creation of this alt-right nation because users have complete control of what information they disclose about themselves. Thus, users hyper-focus on their similarities while hiding their differences, which strengthens their group identity. It is easy to imagine that users think of themselves as not only consumers but creators of /pol/, which most likely

enhances the level of personal responsibility to add to the movement brought on by the internet. This enhances the notion of collective identity and ties individual members to the large group of alt-right identified individuals on /pol/. Community building on 4chan's /pol/ board might look different to more traditional digital spaces, and certainly physical spaces, but one's participation in the space is still a central part of what anchors individuals to the alt-right.

“How do I redpill her on the JQ without her realizing it?”: Discussions of Strategy

Figure 4

Post Number: 338225350



Redpilling others is a central effort for members of the alt-right on 4chan's /pol/ board, as one user plainly stated, “yes. the primary function of this board is to redpill people on the kikes” and another wrote that those on /pol/ should, “keep the peace” and “slowly redpill normies about the lies they have been fed by the elites.”⁶ Working to pull

⁶ Kike: Ethnic slur for a Jewish Person. The term is believed to have originated from the Yiddish word circle or “Kikel” which referred to how Jewish individuals signed their documents on Ellis

others in and have them swallow the red pill is the main goal of those on /pol/ because redpilling others is the primary way to grow the movement. Users have developed specific strategies in order to successfully redpill others and use 4chan to have open discussions of the redpill process. These open conversations about strategy are unique to 4chan, I would argue, because it is understood to be a “member-only” space, although it is freely accessible to anyone on the internet. While outsiders can visit /pol/, my observation suggests that members do not actively consider their presence as discussions on /pol/ are uniquely unfiltered when compared to other more public platforms. Thus users likely operate under the assumption that everyone in the space shares their beliefs and this notion combined with the level of anonymity that the platform provides allows users to communicate openly. Since individuals do not actively consider the presence of outsiders on /pol/ that may disagree with their ideology, they can have honest conversations about ways to pull others in and techniques to use that will result in the most success.

Due to anonymity and its decentralized nature, hate on the internet is hard to regulate despite many attempts by both the government and the private sector. In the words of Bharath Ganesh, an Assistant Professor of Digital Media Studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, hate online is “is ungovernable, rather than ungoverned” (2018; 36). Those spreading digital hate take advantage of the internet's decentralized nature, the ability to migrate across spaces, and the opportunity to use coded language to escape regulation and subvert attempts made to police it. Individual

Island with a circle rather than an x which was thought to be associated with Christianity (American Jewish Committee).

Elites: Common antisemitic trope that upholds the belief that Jewish people have too much power

platforms have varying levels of moderation and therefore allow varying degrees of hate on their platforms. The internet's ungovernable nature paired with 4chan's low levels of regulation makes it a valuable tool for perpetuating radical ideology and pulling in new members. Although members of /pol/ are uniquely versed in communicating their ideology online, they ultimately rely on in-person interactions with those close to them as their primary method for initiating the redpilling process. Their efforts on /pol/, on the other hand, tend to "mostly redpill people passively." As one user explained, "we just exist, they come here, they become one of us. Is that enough though? I think we could be doing so much more reaching out to all the disillusioned white males being rejected by the corrupt pozzed university industry."⁷

On top of being active on /pol/, members are expected to convert their close friends and family in a process that resembles that of friendship evangelism. Reverend Howard Festerling describes Friendship evangelism as, "the most productive form of evangelism," because it relies on existing relationships which can eliminate many of the fears associated with other forms of evangelism (1988, 2). Among evangelical Christians, to evangelize others, one must have a deep understanding of the gospel. Therefore, actively evangelizing others is a powerful way to reaffirm one's commitment to evangelical Christianity; the same can be said for members of the alt-right on /pol/. Through redpilling others, one is reasserting their commitment, understanding, and dedication to the alt-right gospel. Persuading those close to you to take the red pill grows the movement, but it also allows members on 4chan to prove their personal allegiance to others on /pol/.

⁷ Pozzed- "Description for a group/entity that has been infected with postmodern identity politics that erodes its ability to carry out the original mission"(Urban Dictionary).

Like in friendship evangelism, the alt-right recruitment process requires an investment of time. Evangelism, and swallowing the red pill, do not happen overnight; instead, both processes take an immense amount of dedication (Moody, 1997). Like in friendship evangelism, members of the alt-right must learn how to counteract common barriers to accepting the gospel. Reverend Larry E. Moody identifies three common barriers to friendship evangelism as well as strategies to overcome them. The three types of barriers Moody identifies are emotional, intellectual, and volitional. Emotional barriers are created by someone's negative experiences with Christianity and can be overcome by finding common ground between the evangelizer and the seeker.⁸ Intellectual barriers are ones in which a seeker rejects Christianity based on misconceptions or bad information. These forms of barriers are overcome by identifying key questions that the seeker may have and sharing resources or other individuals who may be able to provide answers. Volitional barriers are ones based on the seeker's inability to accept the gospel due to independence or pride. Evangelical Christians typically work to overcome these barriers by identifying repeated excuses and increasing the number of people who are praying for that individual with the understanding that they ultimately have to make the decision to accept the gospel themselves (Moody, 1997).

Overcoming the emotional barrier with alt-right recruitment might look like a member finding an entry point in the ideology that is similar to what the individual already believes. By working from something a potential member already thinks, members can highlight how alt-right ideology is the solution to their problems and fears in that instance and others as well. Overcoming the intellectual barrier happens within the

⁸ Seeker- term for potential convert or member

alt-right when members ask each other for redpill resources for a specific circumstance like that of the opening post of this section where a member asks for ways they might redpill a girl on bumble about the JQ.⁹ Users will then present those resources to the potential member in hopes that the further education will resolve their doubts. Attempts to overcome the volitional barrier can be seen in continued engagement with those who may initially reject one's position within the alt-right. Through being persistent with friends and family, members hope to slowly warm them up to the idea of alt-right ideology and eventually remove the volitional barrier.

As mentioned earlier, members affirm their dedication to the movement through redpillling others. In order to be an ideal member of the alt-right on 4chan, you must continuously attempt to pull others in. Similar to multilevel marketing (MLM) schemes, recruiting others to the company—or in this case, platform and ideology—is the principal way to grow the movement (Cristinel, 2009). For those involved in MLMs and the alt-right, pulling in new members is a way to increase status and prove one's dedication to the group.

Both MLM's and alt-right recruitment strategies rely principally on friends and family when attempting to pull in new faces. MLMs build out a formal organizational structure or “downline” made up of the people someone has recruited and the people those individuals have recruited falling below them (Koehn, 2001). The alt-right does not have formal language for their system of organizing by seniority; however, members do boast about how long they have been on 4chan, how much effort they have put into redpillling, and how many people they have redpilled, which works to create an informal

⁹ JQ- slang for Jewish Question

downline structure. Arguably, alt-right recruitment on /pol/ operates as “a shadow MLM”: instead of buying into a company with the hopes of economic success through growing your own downline, those on /pol/ reframe their worldview around the alt-right to also convert those around them all with the goal that they will go on to do the same, thus building out their own downline.

There is a consensus among those on /pol/ that redpilling individuals takes a lot of time. You do not want to come on too strong at first or the normie will think you are unhinged and write you off from the start. As the opening post of this section states, the goal is to redpill individuals without them realizing it. According to one member of /pol/ the best way to do this is to “pretend to be one of them but 1,000 times further left until it gets ridiculous and then slowly red pill them while pretending to be one of them...” This emphasis on pretending or slowly unveiling different aspects of alt-right ideology highlights just how strategic the redpill process is. To an outsider, the outward acknowledgment of the need to keep parts of the ideology hidden may come off as an admission that what they believe is, at best, not palatable for most, and at worst, blatantly wrong and harmful. However, members of /pol/ likely see their strategic unveiling of ideology as necessary so that a normies worthiness can be proven before revealing all that the alt-right believes. By unveiling small pieces of the ideology over time members can establish a rapport with potential members before divulging their belief system in its entirety.

Because /pol/ is entirely anonymous, proving one’s understanding of the ideology is the primary means of earning cultural capital; however, users must also be careful about how they discuss the ideology with and around non-members. Knowing when and

how to share movement ideology is equally important to understanding it for yourself. For example, one user wrote to another who offered to create stickers to protest the vote for gay marriage in Switzerland that was taking place in September of that year. They wrote:

...thank you for your service. We must be careful with our messages to not make [the stickers] too "ignorant" as the average leftist would label them. We should not mention pedophilia directly, but just hint at it or the NPC will reject the redpill.¹⁰

Since they do not know who will be seeing the stickers, or how closely they already are to the alt-right, they must present the most palatable version of the ideology, both so more people might support it and so they do not give too much information to the wrong people.

The creation of a slow and strategic redpill process through proper pacing allows members to truly feel out those who they are trying to redpill before showing them the most extreme aspects of their ideology. When detailing their attempts to redpill others, users often note the amount of time they have put into attempting to convert a person. One user wrote: "I've been trying to redpill this particular person for about 3 years now. Some are just willfully ignorant." Although this user has been trying to redpill this particular person for years with limited success, other comments suggest that they have not given up because the hope is one day his "recruit" might fully accept the alt-right if they stay persistent.

¹⁰ Non-player character- "An NPC is seemingly a human that is unable to think objectively" (Urban Dictionary).

Pacing and rhetorical process go hand in hand in the redpilling strategy. When attempting to redpill new individuals, members of /pol/ will often choose their language carefully so that those who they are attempting to redpill are most likely to listen. As one user put it:


i dont talk about politics in an aggressive tone in real life because im not a faggot who acts like an emotional child over things i cant control. i realize pissing off a whole room of people while im having a beer and a good time is retarded. if im discussing politics with lefty retards i use my tongue with precision and ask very carefully selected questions that challenge their viewpoints

Similarly, another user wrote, “Well you can't undo years of bluepills like that, if you tell them about everything out of the blue they'll call you a loony flat-earther and won't listen to you.” They then go on to suggest that a successful strategy could be to pretend to be highly concerned about covid and eventually use that position to instill distrust in the mainstream media; if a new skepticism about the media is established, that person will be more susceptible to hearing alt-right ideology. Both of these examples highlight a shared understanding that it is important to meet potential members where they are and to not come on too aggressively when attempting to convert them.

The correct choice of language and pacing means nothing if members do not also choose their topic wisely. There is a debate within /pol/ as to what topics to introduce to those you are attempting to redpill. In figure 5 one user articulates the general strategy well stating:

Figure 5

Post Number: 339102615

Anonymous ID: /QXJkpWA Tue 14 Sep 2021 13:14:07 No.339102615  [View](#) [Report](#)

>>339095869

Here's some advice:

Never argue the central mainstream point being argued, the media polluted the issue and everyone has an opinion.
 I have found it extremely easy to redpill on jews, niggers, 9-11, Israel, world zionism, etcetera.
 It is almost impossible to redpill about covid at this moment because people are "taken" by the news cycle, this is on purpose.
 You cannot win a game, so escape it and play one where you have advantage.
 To give you an example, regardless of covid, all of the media in the US is controlled by jews. Covid does not change this.
 Oh that covid news you read? yeah the writer is a jew and so is the editor and CEO.

In regards to the current crisis, I simply ignore it. As with most crises, it isn't as bad, or as urgent as they want you to think. They want you afraid, reacting to every problem being created, the only winning move is not to play at all.

This user emphasizes avoiding covid and other mainstream points that are already being discussed in the media because everyone is likely to already have their opinions on those issues, shaped by what the group perceives as overly liberal political talking points. They suggest that you should choose something people may be unaware of entirely or play on still pernicious prejudices such as racism, antisemitism, and misogyny. Engaging with existing prejudices seems critical to most redpilling strategies, and in some cases, mainstream topics like covid can be the entry point into redpilling others as they can be tied back to said prejudices. One user wrote, “Ivermectin has been the biggest redpill yet, the obvious shilling here and on the MSM calling a drug that has been used for 20 years horse paste. Anyone with an above room temp IQ sees right through them.”¹¹ This user argues that the mainstream media discourse around the use of ivermectin as a covid treatment proves that the media is lying about covid because they are discrediting a drug that has existed for an extensive amount of time.

The emphasis on covid and especially ivermectin reflect when I chose to collect my data but highlights crucial information about the redpilling strategy. The debate

¹¹ Mainstream Media or Mass Stupidity Media (Urban Dictionary).

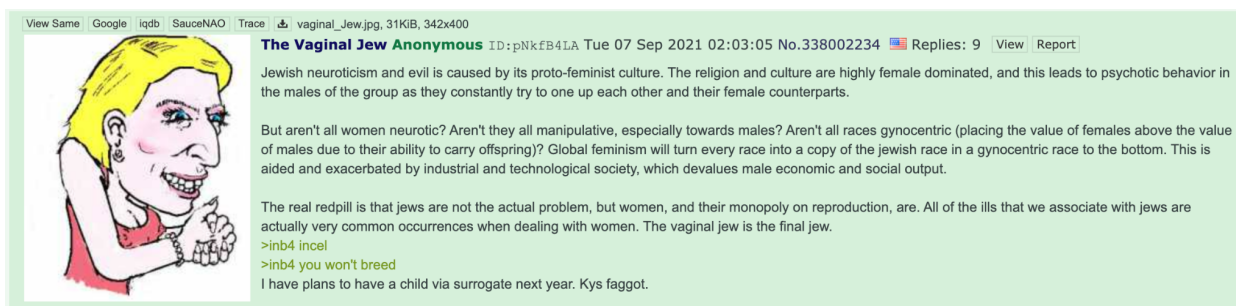
around using mainstream topics is representative of a larger phenomenon where members often chose their entry point based on what the individual they are redpilling is already closest to believing. Often rather than completely unveiling a new issue or worry, redpilling is about giving someone the why or who to blame behind something they already view as a problem. In many instances, members of the alt-right will present explanations or causality for the fears of potential members. By scapegoating minorities, Jews, and other common victims of bias and distrust, the alt-right—and potential members—can make sense of their world and direct their insecurity or worry. For example, if someone who already believes covid is never going to end is being redpilled the member of the alt-right would likely play on that fear and suggest that covid is a deep state tactic to track everyone through vaccination and eliminate the white race, therefore, validating their existing fear.

Regardless of a member's personal belief on the ability of covid and other mainstream topics to get people to swallow the red pill, there is a universal rhetorical strategy that is deployed. Ultimately the goal of the alt-right redpill strategy is to slowly redpill individuals on the Jewish question. As one user wrote, "you can't just sperg out and say 'THE JEWS AND OWN THE BANKS!', you kind of have to cater your thoughts to the specific person that you know and bring up thoughts that can interest them and question why things have to be the way they are." Therefore, taking it slow, modifying language, and relying on a strategy that resembles friendship evangelism allows members to use their relationships with others to build out a personalized path to taking the redpill that will hopefully pull them into the world of /pol/ so they can redpill others as well.

“All of the ills that we associate with Jews are actually very common occurrences when dealing with women”: Alt-Right Views of Women

Figure 6

Post Number: 338002234



Rather than being tied together by a strict set of beliefs, the alt-right are united through what they oppose: diversity of any kind, feminism, both sides of the political establishment, globalism, and cultural marxism (Wendling 2018). There is also one shared central tenet: the best way to combat the Jewish threat is to raise children in the movement. The pronatalist views of the alt-right are not unique to this specific movement as furthering white supremacy and white nationalism through the family and child-rearing is central to other groups like the Aryan Nation and World Church of the Creator (WCOTC) (Ferber, 2003; Simi & Futrell, 2010). Participants on /pol/ emphasize finding a wife and having can family so members of the alt-right can raise ideologically aligned children and thus, actively grow the movement. Discussion of women on /pol/ highlights the alt-right’s pronatalist position and clearly delineates the role of women in the movement.

The intense bias against women presents itself on 4chan through the ways women are both talked about and intentionally left out of conversations depending on the circumstance. Because 4chan is anonymous, collecting accurate demographic data on users is difficult. That being said, one can assume the vast majority of users on /pol/ are males. Throughout my data collection process, there was only one post I could directly attribute to a woman, who wrote: “My Fiancee [sic] has been redpilling me and he sent me here to see what’s really going on. I hate other girls and how they whore themselves out and Western Brainwashing. What should I read to make myself not like the others.” Like many of the other posts asking for resources, this one got over 160 replies from fellow users. Unlike other similar posts which are filled with actual information and resources, the replies to this user are filled with things like “tits or gtfo” (get the fuck out), and, “If you're actually a woman you should just get off the internet and go serve your husband like God intended you to do. Whore.” While not explicitly a male-only space, 4chan is androcentric and informally excludes women. By using misogynistic language and reducing women to their sexual value, men create an environment where women’s opinions are not valued or welcome (Sobieraj, 2018). The lack of women on /pol/ as well as how they are treated on the platform highlights how /pol/ users conceptualize women and their role in the movement. The implication is that instead of being active members of the movement with independent ideas to contribute, women should be passive supporters whose primary role is to support the men in their lives and have children who will become members.

While there are not many women on /pol/, finding women to redpill is a major goal of those (presumably men) who frequent 4chan. Being able to find a girlfriend,

redpill her, and have children is the surefire way to grow the movement. While finding a girlfriend to redpill is a primary goal of many users, the way they discuss women does not indicate that they like women. Rather than being viewed as complex beings' women are discussed as though they are not full humans. Women are often viewed as little more than vessels for procreation. As one user put it, "Women are hardwired to be selfish, narrow-minded Idiots who only care about their cunts and their own offspring." Although individuals on /pol/ belittled women and view them as "selfish narrow-minded idiots," they are also aware that women are necessary for the movement. Individuals thus find ways to insert the importance of women into their critique of them, asserting something along the lines of the post highlighted in figure 7:

Figure 7

Post Number: 337883992



As this post suggests, men must put up with women despite their potential moral failings because raising children and redpilling them is the central pillar of furthering the movement and combating the threat of diversity that would lead to the decline of the white race. Although women might be "whores," without them the movement cannot be successful. This post marks anyone who is not having children as a race traitor, thus

while not explicitly stated, a woman's whiteness along with her ability to procreate is her most important feature.

While figure seven says that virginity is not required, members continually discuss the importance of purity because then women will not be tainted by past sexual partners. One user was discussing the problem of dating a woman who has slept with other men and wrote, “non virginal women are NOT REAL WOMEN they are just a mix of all the guys they let cum in them.” A statement ripe for analysis, the pseudoscientific proposition that women metamorphize into some combination of all the men they have slept with and thus are not real women, is interesting enough. However, the user also implies that by sleeping with a woman who is not a virgin you are also sleeping with all of the men she has slept with. This suggests deep-seated homophobia and fears of inadequacy that these men have concerning other men. The only surefire way for these men to know they are the best man a woman has slept with is if she has not slept with any other men. Making the emphasis on pure women a crucial piece of their worldview allows members of the alt-right to disguise their potential insecurities as part of movement ideology.

Along with being tied to the alt-right, the rhetoric surrounding women on /pol/ has a strong connection to incel culture. Incels, or men who are involuntary celibate, are a group of self-proclaimed “beta males” who are not having sex but believe that they have a right to women and their bodies. Incels believe that women have complete control over the sexual marketplace and are deliberately denying these men access (Menzie, 2020). While both the alt-right and the incel movement grew out of the manosphere movement (see introduction), the incel movement evolved as a reactionary movement by those who

thought the pickup artist movement was humanizing women too much in their teachings and educational seminars (Chokshi, 2018). The alt-right and incel movements often overlap and this overlap can be seen through their mutual interest in white supremacy and their shared language. Thus, the attitude of hypocrisy surrounding women in the data I collected can also be seen in the way incels view women. Both the alt-right and incels view their access to women as a right yet show little to no interest in women as people. Instead, they shame women for their appearance and previous sexual activity (Glance et al., 2021; Ward, 2020). Both of these movements center around men asserting power over women and partaking in a culture of collective misogyny but the alt-right takes this all a step further with their unique emphasis on procreation as a tool for furthering white nationalism.

The /pol/ discourse around women and purity is further embedded in alt-right ideology through its connection to antisemitism. One user (with a nazi flag as their country flag) discussed the way that the “Jew Media” altered the culture around marriage, “So that, after marriage whores like your mother and sister...can have absorbed DNA strands of 100 dicks they took and your cuck-children are impure and malign who will NEVER be uprise [sic] like NatSoc Germany.”¹² This user is stating that if individuals in the movement have impure—or non-white—children then they will never be able to have a movement like Nazis Germany. The argument here is that Jewish people are controlling the media and have altered the way women view marriage so that they are no longer waiting to have sex. This post draws a direct link between impure women and impure children reasserting that only those who save themselves until marriage can have pure

¹² NatSoc- an abbreviation for National Socialist a political party historically associated with Nazi ideology

children. According to this user, because women are having sex with multiple partners, their children are going to be genetically altered in a way that will prevent them from being ideal alt-right children who are willing to take part in the race war. In the end, this post highlights the general consensus around women on /pol/, that they are not much more than a vessel for procreation whose individual impurity is largely to blame for larger movement issues.

“Fuck these normies all over social media about horse paste and drinking bleach. I hope they all fucking die from their job”: Participation and the Policing of Performance

Figure 8

Post Number: 337307618



In the alt-right, social media has become a primary tool for recruitment and information distribution (Reid & Valasik, 2020). Social media serves as an educational and socialization space for hate group members; these spaces often have a specific language to them that can be used to gain cultural capital and also disguise behavior to the public (DeCook, 2018). For those on 4chan, learning how to correctly participate in discourse comes with challenges that can lead to infighting or worse: being marked as a

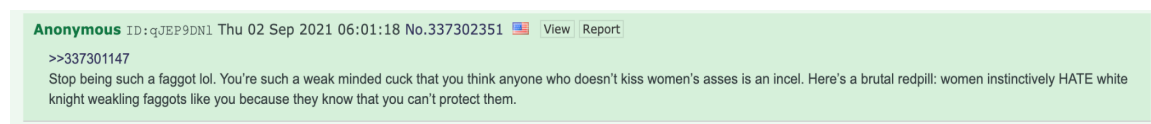
normie. Learning how to navigate 4chan can be exceedingly difficult because as Mark Wendling, an investigative journalist for BBC News, puts it, “Any sense of a coherent ideology is painted over with a thick layer of irony and oodles of the activists’ own enthusiastic coded language, used both to communicate amongst themselves and to deploy insults against opponents” (2018; 11). Decoding 4chan language is extremely difficult for outsiders but it is also a struggle for new members. Learning how to properly engage in discourse on /pol/ is vital because correct participation is thoroughly valued by users as it proves that others are true members and fully understand the alt-right’s ideology.

Unlike other platforms where users can assume another identity or disguise their true identity, 4chan has absolutely no identity markers (Bernstein et al., 2011). This complete absence of identity furthers the need to have posts accepted by other users as authors of posts have their worthiness judged on each individual post they make. While on other platforms users have a catalog of their entire post history, no such thing exists on 4chan. Each post stands completely alone and is detached from any other post a user has made. While this produces challenges for members like the inability to build credibility, it also has potential benefits. For example, if you post something that is not received well that post does not follow you in the future like it would on other platforms. Also, unlike other platforms where someone would be known and thus accountable to their online friends and followers, no such accountability exists on 4chan. Thus while it is not desirable, because it will lead to being shamed, members can post unfavorable opinions with no long-lasting repercussions.

Alongside community building on 4chan, there is also community policing. Users are constantly critiquing each other which leads to infighting. For threads that have many replies, infighting is almost guaranteed. In the replies to a post made on September 2nd, 2021, about how women shouldn't be given sympathy because they aren't capable of real love one user wrote, "Nobody feels empathy with incels," and the user in figure 9 replied:

Figure 9

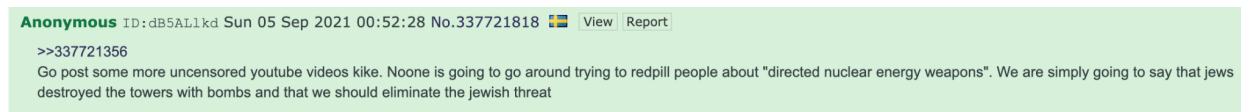
Post Number: 337302351



In the case of this post, one user is giving another a redpill about what kinds of men women supposedly like. This exchange is just one small example of the sort of policing that occurs on the platform. When a user deems another post as wrong or inaccurate, they will aggressively attack the original poster with slurs and invalidate the post. Aggressive, and at some points nonsensical, language is crucial to the lexicon of /pol/. Infighting rhetoric follows the same pattern wherein a user will insult another by calling repeatedly calling them a slur to a group that the alt-right does not support like Black, Jewish, and/or Queer people. While these posts are primarily demeaning, they also serve as a place for education since there is no formal introduction to 4chan for new members. In another thread, the original user claimed that Jews were responsible for 9/11, and the user in figure 10 replied to the original user by stating:

Figure 10

Post Number: 337721818



This user in figure ten is criticizing the original poster by directly disagreeing with their point and calling them a Jewish slur, and then followed up with the “correct” and seemingly more simple perspective, which in this case is that the Jews used bombs rather than nuclear weapons to destroy the world trade center. While these types of corrections are aggressive, they serve an important role in educating members. Because there is no one to directly teach a new user what and how to post, new users learn by surveying existing content and eventually posting themselves. For newcomers, posting is a trial-by-fire educational process, where users learn through reply posts if they are participating in an acceptable manner. For example, in another post, a user claimed they could not watch movies anymore because they are all “unbelievably Jewish,” and the replies were filled with infighting. While many users agreed that Jews control Hollywood, there were some users that argued they should not give Jews that much credit, which was met with harsh backlash. In a reply to that claim, a user wrote: “is this babbys [sic] first redpill? its pretty fucking well known that jews run hollywood, sorry but your favorite capeshit you fap over is financed and created with Jewish financing and most likely propagandised [sic] to indoctrinate you.” This user is shaming the other user by pointing out how little they know and calling them a nerd by saying they masturbate to

“capeshit,” which according to urban dictionary is a slang term for superhero and comic book franchises.

Due to the way that 4chan is structured, there is no way to passively participate like there is on other platforms. Engagement with content that takes little effort like favoriting, liking, or reposting content is not possible. Users must post their own content or directly engage with existing content if they want to be visible on the platform. However, they also have the ability to choose how much they wish to engage with content and how that engagement affects their offline life in a way that can create more separation than when making those decisions on other platforms. The anonymity of 4chan allows users to hide their views from people in their offline life if they choose to as there is no way for content to be traced back to them. The internet, at large, is unique from other group spaces because it allows users to create separation from their regular life and their life as part of a hate group (Brown, 2009; Reid & Valasik, 2020). One could argue that 4chan in particular, allows individuals to foster strong in-group connections while also maintaining privacy. While there is no way to know how many users simply scroll through /pol/ without directly interacting with content, it is likely that those who see themselves as engaged users are posting content as they need to post to prove their presence, even if they are only proving it themselves. Because there is no way to prove you are the one behind your presence on 4chan this process is a reflexive one. While no other users will know it is you behind a post, the validation one receives from posting properly reaffirms their sense of belonging.

Since every post a user makes is judged independently, users focus heavily on the way that they deploy language to prove their allegiance. The correct use of memes carries

a particular significance on 4chan. Memes are pieces of online content that share commonalities of form and structure, which are created with an awareness of one another (Shifman, 2014). In his research, Tom Pollard states, “Memes include images, signs, metaphors, simple videos, and symbols that communicate approval, skepticism, disgust, anger, disapproval, or rage about various issues on websites and chatrooms” (2018; 4). Most commonly, memes are images that get widely shared across digital platforms and through that sharing can evolve and take on new meaning. In a 2017 study, Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, two digital culture researchers, looked at the way memes operated as cultural capital on 4chan’s /b/ board.¹³ They argued that posting memes served as a way to construct both individual and community identity. Nissenbaum and Shifman also argued that the fluid nature of memes allows users to consistently discuss a community’s shared culture because their meaning is ever-evolving. Nissenbaum and Shifman’s findings on /b/ directly translate to the usage of memes on /pol/. Like other forms of communication, meme usage fosters consistent discussion of shared culture or ideology which leads to the evolution of discourse and aids in group production of ideology.

The most prolific meme on /pol/ is Pepe the Frog. Pepe the Frog is an anthropomorphic frog character created by Matt Furie for a comic called boys club in 2005. After Pepe was posted in a comic with the tagline, “feels good, man,” Pepe and the saying, “feels good man,” began to gain traction online (Anti-Defamation League, Pepe the Frog). Eventually, that traction spread to 4chan, and Pepe became the meme to represent those who spent a lot of time on the platform. As one interviewee in *Feels*

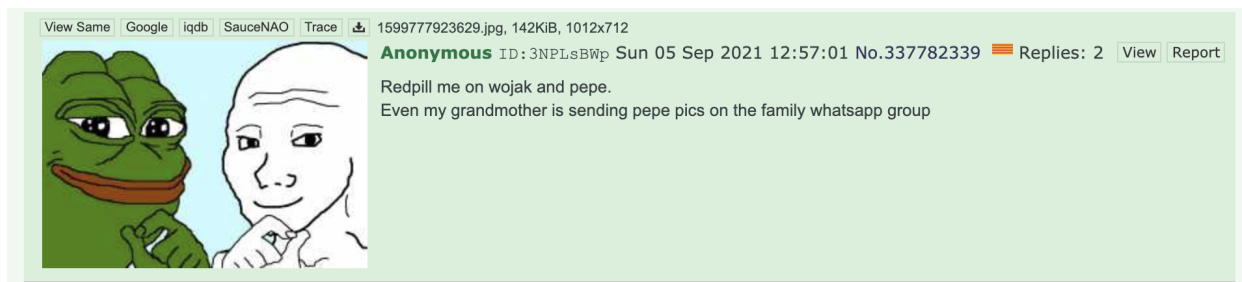
¹³ /b/ is 4chan’s random board

Good Man, a documentary about the radicalization of Pepe the Frog, put it, “4chan is a Darwinian competition for attention” (15:55-16:02). This led to Pepe being reposted in more and more offensive manners which eventually led to him being co-opted by the alt-right on /pol/. Pepe gained even more traction during the 2016 election cycle when alt-right figureheads and even Donald Trump began using the meme. Eventually, due to the symbol being used by the alt-right, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) added it to its list of general hate symbols (Angelini & Furie, 2020).

The post below exemplifies not only the importance of Pepe the Frog and other 4chan memes to the community on /pol/ but also to internet culture as a whole.

Figure 11

Post Number: 337782339



The user in figure 11 employs the term redpill in a common yet somewhat controversial way: as a direct synonym for “inform” or “educate.” However, these forms of posts are often discouraged by other members of /pol/. In a welcome to /pol/ post that always resides at the top of the page, it lists off-topic and /b/ tire threads which should be avoided; the top of the list states, “>Red pill me on X. (with no extra content or input of

your own).” Users do not like others who use redpill in this manner because these simple statements do not add to the larger conversation and can clutter the board. While these types of posts are not always welcome, the fact that a user is asking for clarification on Pepe and Wojak highlights their cultural significance. This user is attempting to increase their “meme literacy” or otherwise learn how to use these memes correctly so they can signal their in-group status to others (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017).

The ability to use /pol/ language and memes correctly play a large part in one’s online presence in other spaces. In “Alt-right Transgressions in the Age of Trump: Perspectives on Global Development and Technology,” Pollard highlights the uses of memes and trolling as the primary mechanism to inundate mainstream spaces with alt-right rhetoric. The nature of these mechanisms allows users to claim humor when in reality it is a deliberate attempt to further hate (2018). Members of the alt-right will take common harmless memes and “white-supremcizes them” by adding Nazi and other hateful imagery to them, as was done to Pepe the Frog. Memes can also help to disguise hateful messaging because people in the out-group may not identify the content as hateful because they do not possess the insider knowledge it takes to understand the messaging. Therefore, using in-group signifiers like specific language and memes allow users to signal status and belonging in other spaces while also potentially subtly recruiting new members (Bernstein et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This project explored alt-right redpill discourse on 4chan’s /pol/ board in order to gain a greater understanding of how member-only spaces on the internet aid in

radicalization. Exploring the ways in which alt-right identified individuals organize online expands our understanding of their effect on mainstream culture and political discourse. Through data collection and virtual ethnography of two weeks of posts on /pol/ directly related to the term “redpill,” I was able to observe patterns in how community building, ideology formation, and recruitment processes were facilitated on the platform. An ethnographic approach allowed me to explore the nuances in alt-right behavior in a way that allowed me to paint a holistic picture of the multiple ways that individuals engage in redpill discourse on 4chan.

This project looked at four principal factors: community building, discussions of recruitment strategy, views of women, and the role of participation to better understand the beliefs and behavior of the alt-right on 4chan. My findings suggest that personal storytelling, a narrative of struggle, and informational resource collection all play critical roles in community formation. The discussions of recruitment tactics revealed that while /pol/’s principal role is to aid in recruitment, more often, initial recruitment takes place in real-world interactions members have with non-members, where interactions are fine-tuned to best attract the potential member. Growing the movement can also happen in other ways like raising a family with alt-right values. While women are crucial to that process, the discourse surrounding women on /pol/ is riddled with misogyny and the voices of women are notably absent from 4chan. Finally, proper participation is key to proving one’s allegiance to the alt-right on /pol/. The most notable element of proper participation on /pol/ is the way users deploy language. Language is confrontational, riddled with slurs, and often nonsensical. While there is no formal introduction to participation on /pol/, self-policing and shaming users for breaking the unwritten rules of

/pol/ discourse serve as a form of education. In the end, being able to participate properly is the ultimate marker of group belonging.

Alt-right redpill discourse on /pol/ thus reveals that while they may seem unorganized and disjointed, the alt-right has very particular rules and structures that govern their online behavior and helps to inform their ideology. 4chan allows members to collectively build out beliefs and shape their ideology in a way that is not replicated on other platforms. The true anonymity that 4chan provides is fundamental to this behavior as it impacts every aspect of the way users interact with one another. Therefore, 4chan serves as a central originating space for alt-right discourse which then can be disseminated to other platforms.

Areas for future research could involve investigating how alt-right online discourse evolves based on the platform to see if there is a connection between the alt-right community on 4chan and the alt-right community on other platforms. Future research could also involve expanding my keyword search of “redpill” to explore how the inclusion of other forms of the term like “redpilled” and “redpilling” might impact one’s findings. Finally, it could also involve tracking the social media posts of right-wing politicians to see if there is any connection between their language online and the language of the alt-right.

These suggestions for future research would provide an investigation into the connections between alt-right online discourse and the wider acceptance of their ideology and its impact on modern America. This research project sheds a light on the often hidden world of alt-right 4chan discourse and revealed that alt-right members use this digital space in organized and deliberate ways to grow the movement. While each individual

user on /pol/ may not have an immense amount of power, their collective consciousness has a direct effect on the culture of modern politics and, if left unchecked, it will only grow larger. Therefore, it is imperative that we acknowledge their existence, understand their messaging, and work to counteract it. While there is no way to pull every individual person out of the alt-right by understanding their messaging one can call it out and combat it when it begins to infiltrate mainstream spaces in order to stop it from spreading.

Last year when I visited 4chan.org for the first time I had no idea that this project would fundamentally change the way I engage with news media online, but it certainly has. Because of my findings for this project, I have made a conscious effort to remain more politically engaged and be more critical about the messages media sends about minoritized groups. This project has made me more aware of how present alt-right rhetoric is in our media, even when it often goes undetected. My hope is that my yearlong endeavor of directly engaging with alt-right content on 4chan allows readers to do the same without needing to go through the difficult process of conducting qualitative data analysis on a hate group. While you yourself may never go on 4chan, and I likely will not ever again, it is imperative that we understand alt-right rhetoric and what members truly mean by it. By doing this, we can pinpoint when it is present in other areas such as media, news, and conversation with others and call it into question. We can't necessarily stop it from happening in fringe places like 4chan, but by educating ourselves we might be able to catch those we know before they fall down the rabbit hole and directly confront alt-right rhetoric when it makes it into the mainstream.

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