INSTITUTIONEN FÖR KULTURVETENSKAPER

"BASED, REDPILLED, AND FPBP."
Examining identification through discursive/affective practices on 4chan/pol/

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Abstract

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In a political landscape increasingly more influenced by far-right populism, the potential for political projects aiming to expand democracy is challenged. With the internet becoming an important arena for political discussion, this begs the question of how online spaces function as politically radicalizing.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the production of radicalization through discursive/affective practices and processes on the internet forum 4chan/pol/. I combine perspectives on website function and design with analysis of the discursive/affective practices' forms and construction of meaning.

The 4chan forum has since 2016 become known as a hotspot for far-right discourses. In this thesis, the forum is studied using online ethnography and analysed in a combination of researcher as informant and a discursive/affective framework based on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory.

I highlight a dialectic between disciplining and desire within the discursive/affective practices. This dialectic construct forms of identification through memetic vernacular and anonymous hate-speech inscribed in fascist discourses, resulting in the construction of an in-group. By meshing together online cultural practices and fascist discourse, the forum users' desire to be part of the forum requires adoption of fascist identity, which produces radicalization.

Reader Advisory: explicit content

I examine content in this thesis that is fascistic and belonging to far-right extremist discourses.

> If you decide to stay on this website, you will eventually run into anons talking about racial "science", jewish conspiracies, and nazi propaganda. None of it is a joke, they really do believe these things and they want to brainwash you into believing it too.
>
> –Anon

Contents

1 Introduction

When I began using the internet regularly in my teens, the hunt for funny posts had me wandering between platforms. Youtube, 9gag, twitter, imgur, reddit, all had their fair share of fun content, and I spent countless hours perusing them, getting a grasp for what meme- and internet culture meant. Something bothered me about most of them though, their political takes were often pretty mediocre. Usually, a bad take on feminism made me leave the site for long stretches, some for good. Then there was also the issue that all the best content, the funniest post, the most though provoking and creative use of memes, were screenshots from another site: tumblr.

Being on tumblr was strange, you needed to know which blogs to follow for fun content, there wasn't a universal frontpage where all the most liked posts of the day showed up. But once I had learned the ropes, I was stuck. Tumblr has a highly creative tendency to develop in-group references by memes. Understanding these are often joked to be its own language. And understanding this language makes being one the site fun, it made me feel like I was a part of something.

Aside from the memes, the general population of tumblr has a strong value system. Tumblr gave me the vocabulary to explore my queer identities, and the political takes that was put on my dashboard made me learn new ways of looking at society, to describe the empty feelings I had when looking toward the future. After a while on tumblr I was suddenly a queer anti-capitalist. Being on this social media helped me develop into a political citizen. And the values that made me like this are a pride of the website. We're queer, we're commies, and we have strange dramas about peoples' opinions on fictional characters.

This thesis, however, is not about tumblr.

> There are so many good people who have come to this website, and left as a completely different person. You may believe your mind to be strong, but the propaganda here is stronger. This website changes you. It's evil. But it's not too late to turn back. Don't subject yourself to the wicked things here. Leave before it's too late.
>
> Think of this website like a drug. It's all fun and games at first. Oh well.
> –Anon

Like tumblr, the community on 4chan have an involved meme culture, as well as a strong value system, though politically, the values of the sites could not be further apart on the political spectrum. Throughout my time online, I have seen many funny screenshots from this forum. They often involve the anonymous users, or "anons", writing really angry posts at each other, or describing incredibly fantastic stories. They also have some wild shenanigans going on, like the time a user live-posted about cooking noodles with gatorade and kept adding ingredients like ice-cream and sprinkles while everyone in the comments got increasingly angry and intrigued. Or this classic post:

>at a friends house
>check out his itunes library
>literally only one song
>Linkin Park - In The End
>almost 30,000 plays

Aside from these fun things, I mostly knew 4chan as the site where fascist nerds hang out, making misogynistic and racist posts, and getting one of my favourite memes, Pepe the Frog, labelled as a neo nazi hate-symbol.
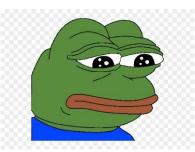

Figure 1. Pepe the Frog, feels bad man

As someone who ostensibly got radicalized on social media, I was curious about 4chan as tumblr's counterpart on the opposite side of the political spectrum. When thinking about how much tumblr influenced my development as a person, I can't help but think about what would have happened if I had stumbled onto 4chan instead. What would my ideals and values have been? How would I have treated other people? What kind of political individual would I have become?

This thesis is, in a way, an exploration of this hypothetical. What I have done is a controlled immersion into the forum's board for political discussion, /pol/, to examine questions about political identity, and how an online space shape political identification.

1.1 Research questions and purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the production of political radicalization through discursive/affective processes and practices on 4chan's *Politically Incorrect* board, an online forum for political discussion. To do this, I will examine the following specific research questions:

– How does discursive/affective practices on the forum construct subject positions and political meaning?

– How does the design of the forum shape the possibilities of interaction?

– How are users of the forum disciplined into states of affect, desire, and identification through discursive/affective practices on the board.

1.2 Background

> God condemned us all to hell, so here we are.
>
> –Anon

In this section I account for the background of the current political moment with regards to the state of democracy and the potential for political projects, the internet as domain for political discourse, as well as that of the forum which is the subject of examination for this thesis.

1.2.1 THE POPULIST MOMENT

Since the 1980s the political situation in what is commonly referred to as "the west" has been informed by a neoliberal hegemony.[1] Neoliberalism is a political and economic project that imposes the rule of markets onto all aspects of society, establishing the role of the state as that of a corporate head, with the primary goal of advancing the free-market economy and generating economic growth.[2] This hegemony also constructs an idea of the individual and society as a whole on the basis of possessive individualism.[3] Brown argues that the hegemony of neoliberalism has reduced the role and influence of democracy as it constructs the person, not as a political actor, but as an economic one.[4]

Mouffe places this overtaking of neoliberalism in the context of an inherent struggle of liberal democracy, namely that between individual freedom from intervention, and the

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[1] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, [Reprint edition] (London: Verso, 2018), p. 11.
[2] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, UNITED STATES: Zone Books, 2015), p. 40–1, 68, 70, 83.
[3] Mouffe, 2018, p. 12.
[4] Brown, 2015, p. 17.

collective rule of the people.[5] She argues that neoliberalism represents the triumph of liberalism over democracy, resulting in a post-democratic society.

The state of post-democracy blurs the fronts of the political projects of the left and right instead establishing a consensus of the centre, reducing politics to issues of management within the status-quo. Mouffe calls this state of society "post-politics".[6] With the free-market rule and increased financialization society has experienced an exponential increase in inequality, resulting in what Mouffe calls "oligarchization".[7]

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the minimization of democracy and the increase in equality has given rise to an increased amount of resistance movements. This conjuncture is by Mouffe dubbed "the populist moment", as it has created the possibility for an increased mobilization of an "us" of the people against a "them" in position of power.[8]

Simultaneously as the neoliberal hegemony began experiencing this crisis, communication technology has completely exploded in the form of the internet. The social medias of web 2.0 are a considerable part of peoples' lives.[9] The increase in connectivity between humans that social media allows, has fundamentally changed how we view society. And consequently, how we view the political. The intersection of politics and the internet can be seen in, for example, Trump's relationship with Twitter.

Fraser wrote in 2007 that the notion of a transnational public sphere was commonplace.[10] In 2020 we saw a wave of protests throughout the west against police brutality following the outrage on social media about policing killing black citizens in the US, showing the extent to which political issues have transnational traction.

Social media has been shown to be subject to a phenomenon where people are drawn to networks expressing similar opinions to their own, creating new forms of echo-chambers.[11] This tendency is speculated to be connected to the increased political polarization that is commonly observed today. A polarization which stands in stark contrast to the institutional consensus of the post-politics state of society.

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[5] Mouffe, 2018, p. 14–5.
[6] Mouffe, 2018, p. 17.
[7] Mouffe, 2018, p. 18.
[8] Mouffe, 2018, p. 11.
[9] Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, 'The Rise of Social Media', *Our World in Data* (blog), 18 September 2019.
[10] Nancy Fraser, 'Special Section: Transnational Public Sphere: Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (2007): 7–30.
[11] Nabeel Gillani et al., 'Me, My Echo Chamber, and I: Introspection on Social Media Polarization', *Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference on World Wide Web - WWW '18*, 2018, 823–31.

The polarization in the populist moment is visible through the many far-right populist movements that have taken hold in the west. Mouffe argues that the right-wing populism seek to reconcile some unsatisfactory conditions of post-democratic society, but that it does so in a way that would lead to nationalistic authoritarian forms of neoliberalism, rather than restoring democracy.[12] Mouffe further argues that the nationalistic forms of populism can be re-articulated into leftist demands for extension of democracy. Such a re-articulation would, I argue, require insight into how contemporary forms of far-right populism take shape. Without such insight, any attempt at re-articulation would be wandering in the dark, not properly understanding the processes that lead people into far-right radicalization in the first place.

1.2.2 4CHAN

Founded in 2003, 4chan is an imageboard, a style of forum that allows for the posting of images and text. The anonymous forum hosts today over 70 boards dedicated to discussions about different topics, like /v/ - Video Games, /tv/ - Television & Film, and /a/ - Anime & Manga. The forum's /b/ - Random board has been a hotspot for trolling since the mid-00s, reaching prominence in the later part of the decade.[13] A substantial number of popular memes can be traced back to the /b/-board, examples include LOLcats, rage comics, and rickrolling.[14]

4chan is also the forum from which the hacktivist group Anonymous originated. Anonymous began as a conceptualization of the 4chan users as a collective, with the individual users coming together and finding unity in the common cause of committing various acts of trolling for the lulz across the internet.[15] For example, hijacking an internet poll to get musician Taylor Swift to perform at a school for deaf children.[16]

In the late 00s, the Anonymous collective began to take on a more political form by involving themselves in causes relating to freedom of information, such as engaging in DDoS attacks on actors deemed unfriendly to WikiLeaks.[17] The political nature of Anonymous was solidified in 2011 with the Arab spring, by the collective helping citizens organize against their

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[12] Mouffe, 2018, p. 23–4.
[13] Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, First MIT Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), p. 18, 52ff.
[14] Phillips, 2016, p. 137.
[15] Phillips, 2016, p. 57ff.
[16] Fernando Alfonso III, '4chan Wants Taylor Swift to Perform at School for the Deaf', *NBC News*, 31 August 2012.
[17] Jessica L. Beyer, *Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization*, *Expect Us* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Phillips, 2016, p. 148.

oppressive governments.[18] When Anonymous became involved in the Occupy Wallstreet movement, it was no longer possible to talk about the activist group and 4chan's userbase as the same entity.[19]

In 2014 users of 4chan were prominent instigators behind the gamergate controversy, a harassment campaign against women working in video games.[20] This was a reactionary counter feminism movement, and it marks the beginning of 4chan being recognized as unambiguously right-wing in the popular consciousness.

The 4chan board /pol/ - Politically Incorrect, was created in 2013, but gained mainstream attention after the presidential election of 2016, when a lot of media speculated on the connection between Trump's victory and the board.[21] /pol/ is typically described as a part of the alt-right movement, an attempt at rebranding neo nazism by the use of memes and internet culture.[22] The board is the original forum for the QAnon conspiracy theory that has gained large support in the US since 2017, and whose supporters were part of the 2021 insurrection attempt at the US capitol.[23]

1.3 Previous research

I would like to place this thesis in a research tradition examining political internet culture. This is a field that has evolved a lot in the past ten years as both the technological circumstances of the internet and the political climate have been rapidly changing.

With 4chan having been around since its launch in 2003, the website has gained a bit of academic attention with regards to the political movements hosted on it. Works like Beyer's *Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization* (2014) and Coleman's *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy: the many faces of Anonymous* (2014) details the hacktivist group Anonymous which has previously used 4chan as a place for mobilization.[24] It would also be

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[18] Phillips, 2016, p. 148.
[19] Phillips, 2016, p. 151.
[20] Casey Johnston, 'Chat Logs Show How 4chan Users Created #GamerGate Controversy', *Ars Technica* (blog), 9 September 2014.
[21] Abby Ohlheiser, 'Analysis | "We Actually Elected a Meme as President": How 4chan Celebrated Trump's Victory', *Washington Post*, accessed 12 March 2021; Dale Beran, '4chan and Donald Trump: Commander in Lulz', *The Daily Dot* (blog), 22 February 2017; Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, 'The Internet Law—No, Not Godwin's—That Explains Why 2016 Was So Terrible', *Slate Magazine*, 28 December 2016.
[22] Sydney Ember, 'News Outlets Rethink Usage of the Term "Alt-Right"', *The New York Times*, 29 November 2016, sec. Business.
[23] Olivia Rubin, Lucien Bruggeman, and Will Steakin, 'QAnon Emerges as Recurring Theme of Criminal Cases Tied to US Capitol Siege', ABC News, 20 January 2021.
[24] Beyer, 2015; E. Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014).

amiss to not mention Phillips' *This is why we can't have nice things: mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture*, which is an ethnographic and historical account of 4chan's troll culture.[25]

/pol/ gained a bit of academic attention after the 2016 presidential election and the rise of Trump's right wing populist movement. General examination about the nature of the site have been made by quantitative studies like Hine et. al. which analyses the content of the forum on a large scale, and Zannettou et. al. which examines the movements and influence of content from the forum to other parts of the internet.[26] Papasavva et. al. provides the largest dataset of the board yet.[27] And Mittos et. al. examines discussions about at-home genetic testing.[28] These studies show that the board is engaging in toxic and hateful discussions on a large scale, and that this is an influence on the general online political discussion. The quantitative accounts are useful, as they provide metrics about site usage, and by showing the impacts of the site on culture and politics they motivate why further inquiry into the processes of the forum is a worthwhile effort.

Affect is an important theme for my thesis, and there has been a few studies into the role of affect in reactionary radicalization that are relevant for this project. For example, Johnson's *The Self-Radicalization of White Men: "Fake News" and the Affective Networking of Paranoia.*[29] Johnson applies affective network theory to the narratives of conspiracy theories in studying how affects move through a networked system. The essay follow affects of paranoia move through the network, from fringe web forums to mainstream social media, and shows how the affective network results in armed men taking it upon themselves to investigate the claims of the conspiracy theories. Johnson argues for radicalization as a "social process of affective networking" and challenges the notion that radicalized domestic terrorists are isolated and "self-radicalized".

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[25] Phillips, 2016.

[26] Gabriel Emile Hine et al., 'Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web', in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, Palo Alto, California: The AAAI Press, 2017); Savvas Zannettou et al., 'On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities', in *IMC '18: Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference 2018* (IMC '18: Internet Measurement Conference, New York, NY, United States: Association for Computing Machinery, 2018), 188–202.

[27] Antonis Papasavva et al., 'Raiders of the Lost Kek: 3.5 Years of Augmented 4chan Posts from the Politically Incorrect Board', in *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 14(1), 2020, 885–94.

[28] Alexandros Mittos et al., '"And We Will Fight For Our Race!" A Measurement Study of Genetic Testing Conversations on Reddit and 4chan', in *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 14(1), 2019, 452–63.

[29] Jessica Johnson, 'The Self-Radicalization of White Men: "Fake News" and the Affective Networking of Paranoia', *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 1 (1 March 2018): 100–115.

Another examination of affect and radicalization is Westberg's *Affective rebirth: Discursive gateways to contemporary national socialism.*[30] Here, Westberg examines organized neo nazi recruitment-propaganda with the perspective of emotionality in texts from a discursive/affective frameowrk. Westberg shows how a neo nazi organization mobilizes affects of shame and hate into prospects of pride and hope in attempts at radicalizing potential recruits into joining the organization.

We have recently seen a few studies which engage in discourse analysis of the /pol/ board. Ludeman's */pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan* goes deep into three posts from /pol/ in a linguistic examination of how national subject positions are constructed.[31] Ludeman addresses how anonymity becomes an important part for interaction on the forum, showing that users revel in the freedom afforded to them by the anonymity and often partake in unbridled antagonism, but also how users latch on to the context provided by the national flags on other users' posts.

Another example is Tuters and Hagen's *(((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan* which examines the use of memes in antagonistic discourses by employing quantitative discourse analysis.[32] They specifically analyse the use of the antisemitic triple parenthesis meme and how it functions as a tool for othering. They show how memes can be understood in a theory of discourse/affect to be important in the construction of in- and out-groups on the forum.

Discourse analysis of /pol/ is combined with extensive methodological discussion in Colley and Moore's *The challenges of studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: 'Come on in the water's fine'.*[33] They primarily examine the ramifications of conducting qualitative analysis on the board, suggesting analytical entryways into not well researched subjects, and identifying how the material can pose problems for research. But in doing this they identify some themes with regard to how users interact with the forum, especially insightful is the discussions they present of users own perspectives on how the forum functions. One of the potential research subjects Colley and Moore point out is actually using discourse analysis to examine radicalization.

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[30] Gustav Westberg, 'Affective Rebirth: Discursive Gateways to Contemporary National Socialism', *Discourse & Society* 32, no. 2 (1 March 2021): 214–30.
[31] Dillon Ludemann, '/Pol/Emics: Ambiguity, Scales, and Digital Discourse on 4chan', *Discourse, Context & Media* 24 (August 2018): 92–98.
[32] Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, '(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan', *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (1 December 2020): 2218–37.
[33] Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, 'The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: "Come on in the Water's Fine"', *New Media & Society*, 20 September 2020, 1–26.

2 Theory

In this section I will present and discuss the theoretical perspectives that I use in my analysis. First, I present the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. Second, is a discussion on how I use affect in this thesis. Third I address how discourse and affect are combined when constructing political identification. And last is a discussion on how technological ecology fit in the discursive/affective framework.

2.1 Discourse theory

The theoretical ground of this thesis is Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, which is developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. While I will only be engaging with a part of this theory's extensive terminology, its post-structuralist and anti-essentialist ontological and epistemological perspectives is what my analysis builds from.

In the discourse theoretical framework meaning is constructed by *articulation*, which is any practice that establishes relation between *elements* such that the identity of the element is modified as a result.[34] My takeaway from this is that any social act, saying things, non-verbal expressions, doing things, etc. is an articulation that orders the contents of the action in a way that establishes the contents meanings. What is important in this theory is that articulatory practice is not bound by any inherent meaning of elements, because the meanings of elements are solely created by articulations. In other words, meanings are contingent. While I may say that an element has a meaning, what that really is referring to is the element's relation to other elements, as an element in isolation is meaningless. In this thesis elements and signs are treated as synonymous.

The structure of elements that result from articulation is a *discourse*.[35] Since the meanings of elements are established by articulation, it is possible for them to be structured in different ways, creating multiple discourses. If the different discourses are not in agreement of certain meanings of signs, they are engaged in a *discursive struggle*. This struggle is an antagonism in which the discourses attempt to establish their respective structure as the agreed upon meaning. If the meaning of an element is agreed upon, that meaning is *fixed*. Laclau and Mouffe stresses

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[34] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 105.
[35] Laclau, Mouffe, 1985, p. 105.

that it is impossible for meanings to be completely fixed as there will always be some aspect of overdetermination of elements, we can thus only talk about partial fixation.[36] We still however need to act as though meanings were fixed, otherwise the infinite possibility of meanings would make communication impossible.

An important term in this theory is that of *hegemony*. A hegemony is a discourse that has fixed meanings throughout society, making the meanings of certain signs be considered as objective or common sense. The presence of hegemony can thus be said to be the absence of discursive struggle. It is around the hegemony that society is institutionally constructed, this is because to be considered legitimate, institutions require the consensus provided by the hegemony.

Since articulation is a practice that is constantly on-going, discourses are also constantly being constructed. It is also difficult to pinpoint the exact and complete structure of a singular discourse. I thus use "discourse" to describe a structure of meanings centred around certain privileged signs. For example, the most important elements in a fascist discourse would be the nation, the people of the nation, enemies of the people of the nation, etc. So, while there may be discursive struggles within a fascist discourse, the meanings of the most important elements are fixed. These most important elements are referred to as *nodal points*, and it can be said that discourses are established around these nodal points.[37]

When the meaning of an element is heavily struggled over, that element is referred to as a *floating signifier*. Floating signifiers are thus frequently articulated, but since their meanings are not very fixed, they change meaning depending on the context. *Chains of equivalence* are connections of signs that come together to form a common meaning. It is through forming of chains of equivalence that floating signifiers are fixed into nodal points within a discourse.

Important for this thesis is the notion of identification of subjects. Within discourse theory a person, or subject, acquires identity by identifying, or being identified, with *subject positions*.[38] Important to note is that identity is not something that is inherent to a subject, as subject positions exist within discursive structures and, like any other sign, they are constructed by articulation. What we in non-discourse theoretical terms would describe as social identity would primarily be how the subject articulates themselves in relation to subject positions. But the identity of the subject is also dependant on how others articulate subject positions and the

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[36] Laclau, Mouffe, 1985, p. 111.
[37] Laclau, Mouffe, 1985, p. 112.
[38] Laclau, Mouffe, 1985, p. 115.

subject's relation to these positions. How a subject is identified is then something that can be struggled over.

2.2 Affect

The concept of affect that I will be using in this thesis is that of Ahmed and Mouffe. In short, affect is the state of the body when it is affected upon by something exterior. Attempts to clearly define affect as an object to study have been made by scholars.[39] I consider the slight vagueness of the concept to make for a versatile theoretical idea and perspective. Like Ahmed, I am generally not interested in making demarcations between emotions and affects.[40]

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed discuss how bodies are pressed upon by other bodies, which turns into impressions, mixed with other values.[41] And in *Affective Economies*, the argument is that emotions are not possessed, but rather that they are affects that move between bodies, putting emphasis on emotions' capability to do things by aligning individuals with communities, and bodies within social space.[42] This process of subjects being aligning by their bodies being pressed upon I discuss in terms of disciplining subjects. For this thesis, the disciplining of subjects is the process through which subjects are affectively aligned when acted upon externally.

2.3 Discourse/affect

In *For a Left Populism* Mouffe inserts the concept of affect into discourse theory to discuss how social agents acquire subjectivity. This combination of affect and discourse is the primary theoretical perspective I use in this thesis. As the discourse theory already works in the frame where interaction is articulatory practice, it is reasonable to also insert affect into this discursive framework, making expressions of affect part of the articulatory practice. What this does is acknowledging that social agents are bodily situated. Both Mouffe and Ahmed use the psychoanalytical notion of some aspect of personality existing outside the consciousness of the agent.[43]

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[39] Todd W. Reeser and Lucas Gottzén, 'Masculinity and Affect: New Possibilities, New Agendas', *NORMA* 13, no. 3–4 (2018): 145, p. 149–51.
[40] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UNITED KINGDOM: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 208.
[41] Ahmed, 2014, p. 208.
[42] Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (79) (1 June 2004): 117–39, p. 119–20.
[43] Mouffe, 2018, p. 72; Ahmed, 2002, p. 119ff.

In discussing this merge of discourse and affect, Mouffe uses the spinozian idea of affect, where affect is what moves humans' desires to act in certain directions rather than others.[44] When the discursive and the affective are articulated together, they produce specific forms of identification. Mouffe envisages these identifications as crystallizations of affects, and that they are what drives the subject into action.[45] Taking inspiration from Wittgenstein, Mouffe further argues that the act of participating in discursive practice, or 'language games', is a way for subjects to acquire subjectivity.

So, in Mouffe's framework, a social agent is affected by an outside force, thus experiencing affects, which informs the desires that inspire action. The affects, desires, and actions are what constructs identification in the social agent. This identification happens within a discursive framework, as in discourse theory, all meaning is discursively situated.

For the purpose of this thesis, I describe this process of affects as "disciplining". Thus, the outside force *disciplines* the social agent into states of affects, desires, action, and identification. I will also consider the "outside force" to be discursive/affective articulations. The identifications that the social agent acquires through the disciplining further informs desires and action. For example, the identification might make the social agent open to placing themselves in situations in which they are further disciplined. Thus, desire and disciplining can be conceptualized as forming a dialectic, in which desire and disciplining act upon each other in the social agent, informing identification and action.

The identification of the social agent within discursive frameworks is the foundation for the formation of groups. That is, a group is constructed when multiple social agents come together around common identifications, forming an "us" that is demarcated from an outside "them".

Mouffe developed her framework of discourse/affect to visualize how the political project of the left can use it to radicalize democracy.[46] A crystallization of collective democratic will in a discursive/affective structure, Mouffe argues, can be achieved by creating new forms of identification that align with the political goals of radicalized democracy. That is, the affects and desires of the individual informs what forms of collective identification the individual acquires.[47] Here we again have a dialectic, as collective identification and the individual's desires act on each other.

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[44] Mouffe, 2018, p. 73–4.
[45] Mouffe, 2018, p. 74.
[46] Mouffe, 2018, p. 76–7.
[47] Mouffe, 2018, p. 76–7.

What this theory of discourse/affect describes is a network of inter-causality involving affects, discourse, desire, identification, action, and disciplining. The interplay between these aspects, which leads to states of discursive/affective identification and desire, is what I use as the theoretical description of radicalization. While some aspects of this discursive/affective process, such as desire and disciplining, may be more in the foreground for my analysis, I want to make it clear that they are functioning as parts of this discursive/affective process. The disciplining–desire dialectic is only legible as part of this larger framework.

2.4 Technological ecology

When using this perspective of discourse/affect in online spaces, I argue that it is important to acknowledge how the agents' bodies are not only interacting with the discursive/affective articulations of other user of the space, but also with the medium that carries those articulations. This could also be visualized by thinking about the technological medium as articulations of design, and thus interaction with the medium is interaction with the designers. Within discourse theory, designing something to be used by other humans should be seen as an articulatory practice. For interaction with a webpage there are, however, many designers involved. Not only are there designers of the page itself, but there are also designers of the browser used to access the page, of the server infrastructure, of the service providing the internet access, of the device used to view the page, so on and so forth.

In *A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology*, Hörl argues for the conceptualization of technology as ecologies.[48] I would argue that Hörl puts too little emphasis on technology as designed by humans, but their perspectives on technological ecology are still useful in this context. Designing technology is to compose an articulation that is interactive even after the articulator is removed from the context. That these designed articulations exist within an ecology means that articulations themselves interact with each other. While humans are present within this ecology, it is very possible that articulations interact and combine into new meanings, removed from any human social agent. If a human social agent then perceive these emergent meanings, they could interpret the mix of different designed articulations as one.

What the technological ecology does here is reconciling articulations and creating emergent ones, removed from the persons who articulated them. For the user of the online

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[48] Erich Hörl, 'A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology', in *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 121–30.

space, they are effectively interacting with the technological ecology as if it was a social agent. This means that the user is affected by the technology, and is experiencing affects that lead to forms of identification and subjectivity. I believe this consideration of how technology affects the user to be important when discussing political identity in online spaces.

3 Method and material

> This is science.
>
> —Anon

In this section I discuss how the study was conducted. Challenges in working with social media, and the 4chan forum specifically, as material. I also deliberate on ethical concerns and how I justify my methods in light of them.

3.1 The material of social media

Social media inhabits an ambiguous position when considering it as material for qualitative study. On one hand, the material visible on a social media website could be interpreted as texts, thus warranting some form of text analytical approach. On the other hand, it is a record of human interaction, inviting to be analysed with ethnographic methods. As Geertz describes in *Thick Description*, ethnography is interpreting the flow of social conversation by saving it for later deliberation.[49] Here, social media acts as both the medium through which social interaction happens, and a record of that interaction. But as Hine argues in *Virtual Ethnography*, the ethnography of the online is always partial, as it is not able to capture a holistic picture of informants and places.[50] While I can see the whole textual exchange between people on a forum like 4chan, it is impossible to account for their reaction to the communication, I thus lose a lot of context for the interaction compared to an offline observation.

This complexity in how the medium is to be interpreted is what I think makes the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe particularly well suited to approach the material of social media. By placing all social acts in a framework of discourse, the posts on the forum can

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[49] Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30, p. 25–6.
[50] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), p. 65.

be analysed as discursive articulations. How to interpret the material within the discourse theoretical framework is something that I will discuss in more depth in my analysis.

In using their framework, I have been primarily focusing on finding forms of identification, especially in relation to affective/discursive practices in the way that they are conceptualized in *For a Left Populism*.[51]

In practice, this means that I have: searched for discursive articulations involving subject positions to see what affective articulations are present in conjuncture, examined articulations responding to other articulations to examine how they articulate affect and construct the space of the board, analysed articulations based on the contingency of the sings to find what meanings are assumed on the board, as well as when signs are struggled over between users and how these struggles articulate discourse/affect. This is not a comprehensive list, but an example of how the theoretical framework has been employed in the analysis.

One obvious challenge when conducting research on the forum is the ephemerality of the content. There is a set number or threads active on the board, and once enough new threads have been created, any thread gets pushed out. If it is not archived by the original poster (OP), it is then inaccessible for public viewing. Even if the thread is archived, it is only saved for a week. This presents the problem of how the material is to be saved for later examination, and for research verification.

For their project, Colley and Moore opted to use screencaptures to store the thread. While this method may be viable for a smaller material, I consider it to be quite inconvenient when working with a larger set of threads.

For the majority of my examination of the material, two ways of accessing the material were used. The first was using the "save webpage, complete" function in the web-browser. This allows any visitor to the webpage to store the complete webpage and all its media content locally, making it possible to read threads after they have been deleted from the server. One advantage with this method is that the page is stored as it was viewed the first time, preserving useful design aspects such as see the number of posts by a specific user, and using internal links to move through the threads. It also allows to stitch together multiple threads into one page using html source-code editing. By placing multiple threads on one page, I could use web browser functions like "find in page" to quickly look up specific posts.

However, when I saved the threads, not all media contents were fully loaded. This meant that only the thumbnail previews of the images were saved. With 4chan being an *image*board, a lot of communication is done through images. Not having access to the pictures in the threads

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[51] Mouffe, 2018, p. 72–8.

meant that I would lose depth in my perception and interpretations of the board. To see all the images for threads I had intended to save I thus took to finding the threads in the *4plebs* archives. *4plebs.org* is part of a network of 4chan archives that continuously rip content from the boards and store it on separate servers. These archives remove the ephemerality of forum content and should be considered an important tool in research of the site.

3.2 Methodology and ethics

As the purpose of this project is to examine radicalization, I was curious of the perspective of the potential new user who would be in the process of aligning themself with the discursive/affective meanings and identifications of the board. For this purpose, I chose to use an ethnographic approach of seeing the forum as a field-site in which I could conduct observations. Virtual ethnography, Hine argues, allows for the possibility to use the researcher as an informant through their meeting with the technology.[52]

This combination of using my own experiences of being in the field and the perspective of a new user seemed particularly productive as I had not visited the forum before this research. I could thus work with my impulses as a new user to inform my decisions when browsing the field.

One of the perks of doing ethnography online is that I as an observer can effectively remain completely invisible in the field. Since I do not represent the "target audience", as I will show in the analysis, this invisibility allowed me to observe without influencing the observed. Thus, I did not participate on the board by writing posts. Since interaction is a big part of the board's culture, not writing posts limits my perspective as I was not interacted with by other users. I could, however, still observe how I was disciplined by both the articulations of the users, as well as the articulation of the technology.

Between the 1st and 28th of February 2021 I made ten visits to the board. Every visit to the board was draining and required rest as I did not want to burn myself out on the content. I typically spent around two hours in the field for each visit, some being shorter and others lasting up to four hours. These visits were typically made in the afternoons central European time, which may affect what nationalities are represented in my material. I clicked into threads with topics that interested me and which I thought to be relevant for the research questions. I deliberately chose a spontaneous browsing behaviour; this was to constructively use my

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[52] Hine, 2000, p. 65.

impulses as a new user of the forum. I figured that a regular new user would not read through threads they did not find interesting and would also not go out of their way to be on the forum at different times of the day to diversify what content they viewed.

Using myself as informant, as well as the way I acquired the material, of course means that the material reinforces my subjective position as researcher. My political identifications also inform my intentions with conducting this research and my reactions to the material. I want to be up-front with the fact that I conduct this research with anti-fascist intentions. My original interest in the board lied in how fascism can be fought and how its populism can be re-articulated into political projects calling for expansion of democracy. The acknowledgement of the critical cultural studies tradition as political goes far back, and it can be seen in one of the Birmingham school's principal works *Policing the Crisis*, which has been a spiritual inspiration for my research.[53]

That my position as researcher is subjective is unavoidable. We all exist as political subjects, which informs how we perceive the world. As Back argues, all attempts at constructing representations of complete and stable objective truths will inevitable be simplifications.[54] However, this does not mean that research is meaningless. By adopting and presenting reflexive perspectives, I open for critical examination of my research. And by using a clear theoretical framework as a basis for my study, I attempt to mitigate my subjective whims. That is to say, even with inevitable subjectivity, we do not have to surrender all attempts at scientific integrity.

The apparent opposition between my own ideology and that of the material requires a certain vulnerability from my part when approaching the material. Taking inspiration from Davids, I have opened myself up to the possibility of finding points of sympathy with the board, and the opinions expressed which with I would typically not want to be associated.[55] Not to say that I am uncritical in my reading, just that I approach the subjects with a somewhat open mind. This requires for me to make myself hospitable and letting the forum come close to me. Just as I was a guest on the board, the board is a guest in my analysis. By adopting Back's idea of ethnographic listening, I employed the method used by Westberg of reading *with* the

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[53] Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, First edition (London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press LTD, 1978), p. ix.
[54] Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, English ed. (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2007), p. 24.
[55] Tine Davids, 'Trying to Be a Vulnerable Observer: Matters of Agency, Solidarity and Hospitality in Feminist Ethnography', *Women's Studies International Forum* 43 (2014): 50–58. p. 55.

material, rather than *against* it.[56] Thus, the goal becomes not to criticise the material after my own morals, but to attempt to understand and contemplate on this understanding.

This relationship of hospitality is however not entirely unproblematic. The extreme content of the board has required me to consider the potential emotional and mental harm to me the researcher by the continuous reading of hateful material, that is calling for violence against minorities in general, including against queer people like me. That is, how will me opening up to this content affect me, and can this affect be harmful.

Colley and Moore discuss the risks of academics being radicalized (or 'redpilled' as it is referred to in 4chan slang) as a concern when doing qualitative research into far-right fields.[57] The potentially harmful and taxing nature of ethnographic research of the far-right is seconded by Askanius, who express experience of personal hurt and numbing after having done fieldwork in neo nazi online spaces.[58] To minimize these risks I have been deliberate in how I interact with the forum. I intentionally avoided full immersion into the field by setting up guidelines for when and how I visited the board, such as only using my computer, selecting certain places in my home to be designated 4chan browsing spots etc. Thus, making the boundary to the field as clear as possible.

The concerns regarding hospitality also goes the other way. In conducting online ethnography, Kozinets argues that there is a gap in consent when considering the use of material from social media.[59] Kozinets state that many researchers simply assume that by virtue of the material being publicly available, the persons making the material should be fine with it being used in research. I agree with Kozinets' problematization and would argue that research should take into consideration the intended reach and audience of online material. When making personal posts online, I typically do not intend for them to reach further than my immediate following, the same way that when I am talking to a friend in public, what I say is meant for them as a limited audience. While the act of speaking may be perceivable by nearby strangers, I would be concerned if they began to take notes on what I were saying. This reasoning can and, I argue, should be applied to social media posts.

For the forum of 4chan's /pol/, there is no concern of real persons being identifiable as the users are anonymous by default. There are however issues with consent and intended

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[56] Back, 2007; Westberg, 2021, p. 219.
[57] Colley and Moore, 2020, p. 18.
[58] Tina Askanius, 'Studying the Nordic Resistance Movement: Three Urgent Questions for Researchers of Contemporary Neo-Nazis and Their Media Practices', *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 6 (1 September 2019): 878–88.
[59] Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*, Third edition (London: SAGE, 2020), p.172ff.

audience. As Colley and Moore discuss, users of the site often take issue with the idea of being studied.[60] The board, while accessible to anyone, is a community with limited openness and I want to acknowledge that entering this space with the explicit intent to conduct research could be considered an intrusion.

Acknowledging this dimension of power that the research is moving in is another reason for why I choose to be open, to listen, and to try not to let the preconceived image of the board as a 'horrible fascist echo-chamber' influence my analysis of its content. That is, to not from the very beginning approach the board as a de facto fascist forum, but rather form my own understanding of the board's politics. While maintaining the caution warranted by the possibility of the board being a fascist space.

Here another of Davids' insights become relevant as they express concern with how their colleges in feminist studies would react to and perceive research of subjects located on the political right.[61] My concern here is that my willingness to seek understanding in a fascist space could be interpreted as a sort of fetishization of fascism, that I am compromising my ideals by not portraying the board in an enough negative light. Me reflecting on this is however not an attempt at protecting myself from all criticism should my portrayal of the board be too lenient, it is simply an acknowledgement of the complicated nuances in researching the far right.

During my observational period, I saved all the threads that I went into, with some being saved after minimal viewing so that I could read them for the first time at a later point. After the observational period I went back into the saved threads and indexed them based on content and my fieldnotes. As Kozinets address in their discussion about netnographic methodology, ethnography of social media is an ongoing process of moving between the material and theory, translating and interpreting parts and the whole.[62] During the writing I have frequently re-visited the saved threads for referencing when conducting the analysis. The saved threads and my experience of being in the space of the forum constitutes the material for the analysis I present in this thesis.

Echoing Kozinets' netnographic approach, many aspects of this research project has been developed during the entire process. By having dialogues with the material of the website, theoretical perspectives, methodology discussed in other studies, the project has been taking shape up until the last moments of writing. The foundation of using discourse theory to examine radicalization on 4chan is one thing that has been consistent in my approach, but a lot of the

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[60] Colley and Moore, 2020, p. 8, 19.
[61] Davids, 2014, p. 55.
[62] Kozinets, 2020, p. 142.

theoretical perspectives involving affects have been implemented as I used the empirical to understand the theory, and the theory to understand the empirical. This process of discovery has in turn shaped what questions I have been interested in examining with this project. I have steadily moved away from a traditional linguistic discourse analysis as I became more interested in the shapes of the discursive practices and the affects at play in them. Simultaneously, my perspective on the fieldwork shifted from it being mainly a method for gathering material to it being central for the ethnographic discussion that was emerging from the analysis that I was writing.

The size of the material largely dictates how granular the analysis can be, and subsequently what knowledge claims the research can make. Ludeman's study does a detailed linguistic analysis of three posts, and can thus explain how some mechanics of discourse work on the forum.[63] They have however selected these posts from a dataset of over 100 threads and can thus argue that these mechanics are emblematic for interaction on the forum. Colley and Moore use a dataset of one thread with 333 posts, enabling them to go relatively deep into their material in the thematic analysis.[64] Tuters and Hagen did an archival search for a key-phrase and used all instances of that phrase as their material, which allows for general conclusions about the trends for this phrase.[65]

During my time in the field, I saved 19 threads in total, consisting of 2222 posts and 496 images. 1440 unique poster IDs appear in this material, meaning that in theory 1440 people are the creators of this material. But as poster IDs change between every thread it is not possible to say if this is the actual number of individuals represented. Though the thread with most commenters has 165 post IDs, which means that the real number of people who created the material is somewhere between 165 and 1440. Number of replies in the threads range from 14 to 385, making the material represent both smaller and extremely popular discussions on the board.

With the size of my material, I can have intimate knowledge of the content in the threads, allowing me to do close analysis of specific instances in the discursive/affective processes, while also making it possible for me to make assessments regarding general tendencies concerning these processes on the board. In other words, I believe this scope makes it possible to properly listen to the material, while also placing it in the wider context of the field.

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[63] Ludeman, 2018, p. 94.
[64] Colley and Moore, 2020, p. 6.
[65] Tuters and Hagen, 2020.

One ethical concern regarding research on the board that I have yet to discuss is the reproduction of offensive material. In analysing the discourses and processes present on the forum, there is some need to reproduce this offensive content. To mitigate this, I have censored any obviously offensive words and replaced them with labels such as [n-slur], but removing offensive words does not reduce the hateful messages behind them.[66] As Colley and Moore argue there is a need to analyse the language of the site as it is used to get a nuanced understanding of how discourses are constructed on the forum.[67] I argue that the use of offensive language is integral to identification within the forum, thus the offensive content is difficult to avoid in an analysis. This too is the case for the discursive narratives constructed on the board, as they shape the ground for political identification within the discursive/affective framework.

The offensive content has however shaped how I present the analysis more than just the avoidance to write out hateful words. By eschewing depictions of the granular language usage, my focus is on the forms that the discourses take, and the processes through which discourse is established. In this sense, my analysis is more concerned with how the discursive processes happens, rather than what the discourses' structures of meanings look like.

Despite all the ethical concerns with this study, of intrusion into an online community, of potential harm afflicting me the researcher, of reproducing harmful narratives, I believe that examination of this forum, and others like it, to be important. With the internet being a place of considerable political influence, and with far-right populism having been 'on the rise' for well over a decade, understanding of these political online spaces are important to get the full scope of our contemporary political situation. Why I chose 4chan specifically is part of the new user perspective; 4chan is a well-known name in political internet circles, and individuals curious about exploring far-right ideology could be drawn to it as a first point of entry into these ideologies. The threat that far-right populism poses to human rights and the potential for expansions of democracy should not be underestimated. Understanding *how* these kinds of discursive and political projects construct meanings and function as radicalizing is important for understanding why far-right populism has achieved such a presence in today's political landscape. And subsequently, how we can develop democratic projects against far-right populism.

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[66] A slur is essentially a word that can be categorized as hate-speech targeting a specific group of people. The n-slur specifically targets Black people.
[67] Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 4.

4 Analysis

In this section I present my analysis. The discussion is a weave of the material of the forum, theoretical insights, and an ethnographic telling of how I experienced the board. First, I briefly discuss the aesthetic component of the board. Second, I examine how the rules of the forum and the community discourses create conflicting visions of what the board is supposed to be, and how this relates to constructing the values of freedom of expression. In the third part, I discuss how the anonymity of the board shapes the behaviour of its users and how we are to interpret irony in this context. I will also relate anonymity to hate-speech practices and construction of the userbase. In part four, I examine the thread structure of the forum, how it informs user interaction and liveness of content. Part five is a discussion about memes, how they create group identification and closed spaces while also enforcing discursive frameworks. In part six I discuss how users antagonising each other shapes interaction, moves affect, and creates standards for user content on the board. In the final part of the analysis, I examine how subject positions are constructed in relation to discursive projects.

However, I would first like to address what kind of discourses are present on the board. The myth of the forum in the popular consciousness is that it is dominated by fascist and neo nazi discourse. This is why many researchers, me included, are attracted to the board for conducting studies of the contemporary far right.

Nevertheless, I believe that it is important to not simply reproduce a pre-established idea of what the board is. As I discussed in Method and material, I entered the board with the intent to listen, to allow the field to shape my interpretations of it. At least to the biggest degree possible while also protecting myself from the potential harm of immersion into a potentially far-right space.

Colley and Moore's study quote several users who question the study's focus on the alt-right presence on the board, claiming that the left also has a strong presence, and that 4chan's userbase does not represent a singular ideology.[68] I agree with the anon claiming that 4chan's users are not a monolith. Despite this, I see it as undeniable that the dominant discourses are variations of fascism, neo nazism, and far right ideology. Though these dominant discourses are challenged, the challenging discourses are not as frequently articulated, nor do they form

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[68] Colley and Moore, 2020, p. 13–4.

chains of equivalence to construct broader discourses as effectively as the dominant ones. A non-dominant discourse can have support in one thread, but in the next thread it might be completely absent. While the dominant discourses are almost guaranteed to be present in any thread with a few posts.

It is possible that this may change in the future. The board is not stagnant, and as political developments are made, the kinds of discourses that dominate the board may change. But at least for the period during which this study was conducted, the board is dominated by neo nazi discourses.

4.1 Aesthetics

When you visit 4chan.org you are met with a visual quite unlike the standard social media website. Start pages for other social medias are typically white accented by a bright colour, with a prompt asking you to log in or create a new account. 4chan's default background is a colour gradient from peach to pale yellow with a maroon accent. The logo has a glossy finish, breaking with the norm of flat colour logos. It is accompanied by a bold text spelling "4chan".

The font used consistently on the site is Tahoma or Bitstream Vera Sans depending on the device used. The colours and font can be customized by selecting from a list of themes. Aside from the regular "Yotsuba A" theme there is "Yotsuba B", which changes the colours to pale light blue, "Futaba" and "Burichan" which are Times New Roman versions of Yotsuba A and B respectively, and "Tomorrow" and "Photon" using black and grey backgrounds. This aspect of personalization is not common on other modern social media platforms, many of which only offers the choice between a white and a dark background.

The themes all make the visual experience of 4chan distinct. In a world wide web where the biggest sites have cohesive and colour-wise minimalist designs 4chan embraces the aesthetics of an older era of the internet. This is likely due to 4chan having not significantly updated its user interface since at least 2008.[69] The refusal to adapt to industry standard aesthetics could be seen as a deliberate expression of counterculture, mirroring those same anti-mainstream views commonly expressed by the forum's users. I think it is more likely upholding a legacy of what an imageboard is supposed to look like. The site that inspired 4chan's creation, 2chan.net, has a theme with the same colour palette as 4chan's Yotsuba A.

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[69] The earliest screenshot I have been able to find is from early 2008.
https://fuckyeah4chan.tumblr.com/post/131018195 (acquired 28-04-2021).

The aesthetic of the forum is relevant when considering how new users find the space. A lot of content from 4chan is screencapped and is circulating on other social medias. Having a distinct aesthetic makes it easy to identify the source of these screencaps. I knew about 4chan long before I visited the site, largely due to the myth of the forum being constructed by screenshots on other platforms. Of course, only the best content gets screencapped and circulates. And if you have seen some funny posts might be compelling to seek out the site for yourself, to see the original source of the content.

4.2 Rules

On the front page of 4chan, right under the logotype, there is a textbox, helpfully asking and answering the question "What is 4chan?":

> 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!
>
> Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Rules before posting, and read the FAQ if you wish to learn more about how to use the site.

Clicking on the link leading to the rules page leads to a long list. First are the 17 global rules, active for all boards unless stated otherwise, dictating how the site is to be used with rules such as prohibiting the use of signatures or spamming. Global rule 3b caught my eye:

> 3. You will not post any of the following outside of /b/: [...] b. Racism

The /b/-board is the board where everything goes, titled "Random". The list of global rules ends with:

> Remember: The use of 4chan is a privilege, not a right. The 4chan moderation team reserves the right to revoke access and remove content for any reason without notice.

Aside from the global rules each board has their own set of rules. The rules specific for /pol/ reads:

> **/pol/ - Politically Incorrect**
> 1. Debate and discussion related to politics and current events is welcome.
> 2. You are free to speak your mind, but do not attack other users. You may challenge one another, but keep it civil!
> 3. Posting pornography is not permitted. This is a politics board, not a porn board.

Once on the /pol/ board itself there is a header area with banner images, site news updates, and links to other boards. Under the header area are the boards threads, the main content of the forum. The two top posts are static, pinned to the top of the page by moderators. The first one is titled "Welcome to /pol/ - Politically Incorrect" and further details the rules of the board, with examples of topics that will be deleted like "Red pill me on X" or "Is X white?".[70] The attached image is a graphic listing logical and rhetorical fallacies, with illustrations of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle. The second post is an image of a light-up construction work sign reading "slow the fuck down". The post's text is in big bold letters urging users to check the catalog before creating a new thread, witnessing a problem with separate threads with similar topics being created, flooding the limited thread count of the board.

The rules page, and the extension of the top two posts on the board, is expressing what the forums moderator staff considers to be threats to their vision of what the board should be. That is, a well organised space for high levels of discussion about politics and current event, sporting "quality, well thought out, well written posts".

This idea from the moderators of what the board should be goes counter to a well-established view that /pol/ was created as a containment board to funnel racist content away from other boards.[71] /pol/ as a containment board suggest a site-wide moderator staff without the resources to handle a forum overrun with racism, admitting to themselves that racism will always be present, and installing the board as a sacrifice to keep other boards cleaner. /pol/ as a containment board would suggest that there is an unspoken rule saying that moderators will not stop racist content on this board.

This disparity between the ideas of what /pol/ is can be seen further in the board's top post, which states that:

> The variety of threads allowed here are very flexible and we believe in freedom of speech, but we expect a high level of discourse befitting of the board.

Here making the freedom of speech conditional by putting it in relation to high levels of discourse. *Politically Incorrect*'s users are well known for a radical belief in the freedom of speech, but this goes directly counter to having rules for the board.[72]

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[70] "Redpill" is a reference to *The Matrix* (1999). The main character is presented with a choice between taking a blue or a red pill. Taking the red pill means that he wakes up from the simulation he has spent his entire life in. On /pol/, "redpill" is used to signify being woken up to the horrible truths of the world, which means realizing that far-right ideology presents an accurate understanding of the world. In short, being "redpilled" means being radicalized.

[71] James Palmer, 'How Does Online Racism Spawn Mass Shooters?', *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2019; Rob Arthur, 'The Man Who Helped Turn 4chan Into the Internet's Racist Engine', *Motherboard, Vice*, 11 February 2020.

[72] Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 9.

This struggle of defining what the board is can be seen in the phrase "fuck jannies" commonly expressed by the forum's users. "Jannies" is a nickname for "janitors" which are part of the moderation staff on 4chan. The "fuck jannies" expression takes a clear stand against the notion that the board should at all be moderated. In a thread posing the question "Why does Reddit suck so much?" (Reddit is another online forum) the common answer seems to be that it is largely because it has heavier moderating than 4chan. This constructs the appeal of 4chan to be its lacklustre moderation, which goes counter to the appeal constructed by the rules, that is, a high quality of discourse.

In my perspective, the /pol/ boards are *not* moderated to the standards set up by the rules. Racist speech is rampant and present in almost every thread I have come across. Threads often do not engage in the "higher levels of discourse" urged by the moderators. In this context I would also like to underline that the demands for free speech should not be uncoupled from the ideologies making these demands.

In the thread about Reddit and moderation there is a discourse created around the idea that left-wing ideologies only emerge when a forum is heavily moderated, and that unobstructed speech leads to emergence of right-wing ideologies. There is an idea in this discourse that I see as analogous to the concept of marketplace of ideas. Namely that right-wing ideology will gain support as long it is allowed equal 'competition' with other ideas. The call for unobstructed speech is then coupled with the idea that this radical free speech will lead to the spread of right-wing ideology. "Free speech" is here a floating signifier, that becomes loaded with "emerging right-wing ideology". This coupling means that efforts to limit expressions of right-wing ideology, such as moderating a forum, is also seen as limiting free speech.

In *For a Left Populism* Mouffe argues that a left populist project should aspire to inscribe affect for democratic values into a form of identification that radicalizes democracy.[73] It is interesting then to see how the far-right discourses on /pol/ have managed to inscribe the democratic value of freedom of speech into an affect for a fascist political project. The call for freedom of speech could be seen as a dishonest discursive strategy, calling only for this democratic value to be enforced to not themselves be silenced, and that the proponents of the political project only have no real commitment to freedom of speech in their core ideology. But from a perspective of radicalization, making freedom of speech a front and centre issue could be mobilizing people's affect for democracy into support of fascism.

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[73] Mouffe, 2018, p. 76–7.

4.3 Anonymity

One aspect of the forum's design which has big impact on interaction is a commitment to anonymity. In this part I will examine how articulations can be understood when disconnected from an articulator, how this disconnect creates an emerging community discourse, and how the anonymity fosters a space for hate-speech.

The anonymity of 4chan comes in big part due to the absence of user profiles. Anonymity in online spaces is not only related to if content and personas online can be associated to a specific person offline. Anonymity online is also in how the online persona is constructed. A profile can be anonymous in the sense that it cannot be connected to an offline person, but that profile has history of interactions and content which constructs a persona from that profile. On a forum with user profiles, it is possible to read a user's history of interactions and construct an image of the persona, even if there are no traces of who the user behind the profile is offline.

We can view this as the profile's history of interaction becomes part of that profile's articulations. From a discourse theoretical perspective, social actions are also part of the process of constructing meaning. When making a discursive articulation, one does not only put the linguistic signs in relation to each other, one also put the signs in relation to oneself. The social act of posting a comment articulates and constructs the meaning of the profile that it is posted from.

One function of having access to the history of a profile, is that it enables other users to assess if a comment by that profile is genuine or ironic. By cross-referencing the comment with the profile's history of interactions the reader can observe patterns and interpret the articulation given that context.

What happens when a forum strips away user profiles, the way 4chan does, is that it also removes a lot of the context of the persona making the post, of the articulator. This can make it largely impossible for readers to interpret the intent behind an articulation. The only context of users provided on /pol/ is the flag that indicates from what country a post was made, or a flag chosen by the user to indicate some political alignment. While it is possible to choose a screen-name, as Ludeman points out, users who separate themselves from the anonymous collective are vilified.[74]

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[74] Ludeman, 2018, p. 92.

The lack of context regarding the articulator begs the question of how to interpret the idea of an articulation's *meaning*. Is the meaning of an articulation what the articulator intended the meaning to be, or is it what the receiver interprets the meaning to be?

Let's use the idea of an ideal reader to examine this by imagining different approaches for interpreting the same articulation. The ideal reader always interprets the articulation the articulator intended, and has the intended affective response.

The articulation we will examine is a real post from /pol/ and consists of an image depicting a trans woman pre- and post-transition, with the text "how do we prevent this?". Say that the articulator had meant this to be parody of a transphobic post, then the ideal reader would interpret the post as funny at the expense of transphobes, but also anger towards the idea of genuine expressions of transphobia. If the articulator is genuine in asking the question, the ideal reader sees the post as an example of the "transgender epidemic" and feels anger towards proponents of trans rights, and perhaps also grief for the person lost to transgenderism. We could also imagine the articulator as primarily engaging in a language game by mimicking other posts on the board, intending the post to be humorous without consciously considering any political implication, then the ideal reader find the post funny without affective reaction regarding trans rights.

Since there is no context of the articulator all these readings are possible. But this allows other users to assert their own interpretation of the articulation. We can see this in the community response to the original post posing the question "how do we prevent this?". Commenters interact with the articulation, both the image and the text, as if it were genuine. Even if the OP meant the articulation to be ironic, the fact that the other users engage with the post as though it is genuine superimposes genuinity onto the articulation. What the other users engage with is not some intended reading of the post, but with their own interpretation of the post.

The same uncertainty with regards to intent can be extended to comments. A comment that seemingly engages genuinely with a post is not necessarily *not* being ironic. There is an adage known as Poe's Law which stipulates that sincere expressions of extremism often are indistinguishable from parodical expression of extremism.[75] Although it is not very likely, it is still possible that everyone posting on the /pol/ board is ironic, engaging in a multi-layered act of role-playing, creating a parody of what a forum for far-right discourses could look like.

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[75] Phillips & Milner, 2016.

I argue that the intent can be completely disregarded when studying how discourses are shaped on the forum, because what matters is not the genuinity of the posts, but how the posts develop discourses. Colley and Moore argue that ironic use of racist content reproduces racist discourses, with risk of normalization of systemic racism.[76] Similarly, Tuters and Hagen argue that even if users are ironically engaging in the use of the antisemitic triple-parenthesis meme, they are nonetheless assenting to an antisemitic narrative being present in essentially all discussion on the board.[77]

Even if the discourses of the forum were developed completely ironically, as they spread and get more attention from people who engage with the discourse as though genuine, the effect is the same as if they had been genuine all along. This hypothetical relates to a common saying on the internet:

> *Any community that gets its laughs by pretending to be idiots will eventually be flooded by actual idiots who mistakenly believe that they're in good company. – Rene Descartes.*[78]

That is to say, the discourses emerging on the site can largely be disconnected from the persons behinds the individual articulations, as the meanings are still constructed, and they still drive the circulation of content on the board.

While the anonymity of the forum can be frustrating from a reader perspective when it comes to the notion of genuinity, from a user perspective, this absolute anonymity can be freeing and empowering. Broadly speaking, nothing you say on the forum will come back to haunt you later. While you might face backlash in the thread you commented on, once you click away from that thread you will not know how people respond to your comment. There is no connection to your offline self. Unless you give away your identity freely, no one will notify your friends, family, or workplace about what you have been saying on the forum.

This aspect of freedom from consequences in the anonymity can be seen embraced in the name of the board: Politically Incorrect. The name implies freedom from holding the discussions on the board to the standards of political incorrectness. Breaking of the norms regarding political correctness could, in a non-anonymous space, lead to losing your job and being socially ostracised. So even if there had not been rules against politically incorrect behaviour, users might not engage in political incorrectness due to concern about the

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[76] Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 14.
[77] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2232.
[78] Note that the "–Rene Descartes" is part of the quote. This was, to the best of my knowledge, not said by Descartes. The origin of the quote is unknown.

consequences of such transgressions. As we have seen in the discussion about moderation, enforcement of the rules is lacklustre. Which combined with the anonymous aspect of the design, creates a space where nothing is off-limits.

The consequence of this is that, as Ludeman writes:

> *...much of what is viewed and read on /pol/ can be understood as racist, racialized ,or otherwise unnecessarily vitriolic and violent, yet is viewed by many in this context as everyday discussion, removed from social policing from politically 'correct' others.*[79]

The space being removed both from rules and social policing resulting in the extreme normalization of hateful speech provides some extra context for the discourse's call for freedom of speech. /pol/ is perceived as a space allowing free speech, the call for other spaces to commit to similar policies of no-rules should, in my opinion, be seen as wanting other spaces to allow hateful speech.

The mobilization of affect for freedom of speech in this context thus depends on the perception that not allowing hateful speech is counter to the democratic value of freedom of speech. In a thread titled "What will be considered 'hate speech' in 2025?" we can see how the board's idea of "hate speech" is articulated. Anons answer the title question with: "everything thats was normal in 1960", "anytime a white man speaks", "not wearing your mask", "breathing", "2+2=4", among other more obviously joking answers. This implies that they view what is considered "hate speech" today to be non-offensive and that the notion of "hate speech" is a form of censorship.

It is likely that at least some forms of today's hate speech that users consider non-offensive is actually hateful. Mouffe uses Wittgenstein's notion of passionate commitment to systems of reference to argue that affective allegiances to discourses is the basis for political identity.[80] This can be used to explain retaliation against attempts to remove parts of an individual's language. And on the board the idea of "hate speech" is viewed as intrusion into personal language use. When faced with removal of what you have affect for, the desire to preserve the object of affect can be seen as an automatic response. This extra desire would however mean that the affective bond intensifies.

This affect for what is considered by others to be "hate speech" would mean identification with the use of "hate speech". That /pol/ has no restrictions on language makes it a space where

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[79] Ludeman, 2018, p. 93.
[80] Mouffe, 2018, p. 76.

users can express this part of their identity, a space where they can be their genuine selves. Once the user has an affective commitment to using language regarded as "hate speech" they might consider making the other kinds of hate speech present on the board part of this affective vocabulary. This can explain how affect for freedom of speech with regards to personal language can be channelled into affect for far-right ideology calling to uphold the freedom of speech to allow hateful speech.

While it might be freeing for some, being subjected to this hateful vocabulary during this project has been a big mental toll on me. My instinct when I first started reading the site was to just leave, that the language was too much for me. While I know that this kind of hate exist, I usually try not to think about it. Facing it for hours every day was uncomfortable, a constant reminder that people who believe these things actually are out there.

My psyche getting "infiltrated" by the views expressed on the board was one of my bigger concerns going into this project. I was conflicted about how I could observe affects while maintaining the distance required to not run the risk of being redpilled. However, after feeling out how the board affected me, and determining that I was in fact not likely going to adopt an ideology that was counter so much of what I believe in, I allowed myself to take steps into immersion.

After a while of working with the material of the board, I have been somewhat desensitized to the hateful language, which makes the browsing easier. But desensitization also implies normalization, meaning that the slurs and hate-speech started to frequently appear in my thoughts. By living in a society that is built on structures of oppression, I have internalized a lot of it. Working against these internalized bigoted views is a constant struggle. And on top of that I now have a 4chan neo-nazi living in my brain, throwing slurs around and egging on thoughts that I am ashamed to have.

I entered this space to critically study how the board use the hateful language, but how do the other users justify being emerged in this vitriol to themselves? More users might be engaging in some form of critical readings of the site, but what about everyone else. They might think the exposure to the language is worth it for the other content on the board. Or maybe they just do not mind the language at all. Maybe they see the hateful language as something that makes the board an attractive social media.

The notion that hateful language as an attractive part of the forum have some merit. In this example one user wrote "the N word" in a post, and gets a reply reading (to my best approximation):

```
>N word
[N-SLUR]
Say it with me
[N-SLUR]
[N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][N-SLUR][…]
```

I interpret this as the responder attempting to discipline the first poster's adherence to political correctness in the use of "the N word". More users chime in on this by making replies using the n-slur, showing clear disapproval of the first posters act of self-censorship.

The rest of the first poster's comment is by no means politically correct, as they use another slur and talk about how they got banned from reddit for using transphobic slurs. The "N word" in the text could also be interpreted as a quote. So, what the replier responded to was simply the use of "the N word" instead of spelling out the slur. Searching through my saved material (of around 2200 posts) this is the only instance of the n-slur being self-censored in any way, compared to around 200 non-censored instances of variations of the slur. The word "black" to refer to people appears around 45 times, without facing similar backlash.

The n-slur specifically then seem to have a special place in the discourse of the board, representing freedom from expectations of political correctness. What this radical freedom of expression has resulted in in this example is that avoiding to indulge in the freedom allowed is viewed as a transgression. Using "the N word" signals that you care about political correctness and is interpreted as you being hesitant to fully embrace the culture of the board.

So, the everyday tone of hateful speech could be seen as the board organically filtering out users who do not assent to the language used, because if you do not tolerate the language, you can just not be on the forum. The desire of being in the space must be stronger than the repulsion from the hate-speech. Users participating in the space without using slurs are disciplined by other users to change this behaviour, as seen in the example above. This creates a feedback loop where users who are okay with posting slurs create an environment catering only to other users who are okay with posting slurs.

This illustrates the dialectic between disciplining as desire. As the desire to be in the space of the board leads users to be disciplined into desiring the presence of hate-speech. But it also shows how different desires can clash, such as the desire to be on the board and the desire to not be subjected to hate-speech. In such a case the stronger desire will dictate the action, namely if the user is to stay on or leave the board. In this sense the disciplining has two functions: indoctrinating willing new users into the use of hate-speech, and forcing unwilling

users away from the board. While both these functions serve to maintain the culture of the board.

4.4 Threads

In this section I discuss the design-structure of user generated content. I take a look at the forum's threads from a technology–human interaction, and how this leads to affective forms of identification.

When beginning to view the content of the board, I have found two main approaches. The first one is to start by viewing the board's front page. The front page is the landing for any in-site links to /pol/ or if you were to type out 4chan.org/pol/ in browser search-bar. Here you see the image and text of the opening post, as well as the latest replies in the thread, making it possible to quickly get a grasp of what threads and topics other users are engaging with at the moment.

The second approach is to visit the catalog page, as urged by the second moderator post. On the catalog page opening posts are ordered in a grid pattern with the image and the beginning of the text being visible, as well as the statistics for the number of replies and images in each thread.

Where on the frontpage my eyes usually drift to the comments, on the catalog page the image is the centre piece. Common image types to be attached to the opening posts are nation flags; screenshots of headlines or tweets; headshots of political figures like Trump, Hitler, Greta Thunberg, or Edward Snowden; cartoon memes like pepe or wojak; infographics; and (often sexually suggestive) photos of women. Images are here used to draw attention to the thread, and the thread text is to keep the viewer interested. The text of some opening posts prompts a response, sometimes with open questions asking for other users' opinions on a topic, others simply making controversial statements.

There are always exactly 200 threads active on the board so whenever a new thread is made the last thread on the list gets pushed off the board. When a thread is pushed out from the board, it is deleted unless the OP (original poster) who created the opening post of the thread archives it. An archived thread is stored on 4chan for a just week before deletion. When a post gets 300 replies it hits the "bump limit" and will no longer be "bumped" to the top of the board when it gets new comments, after which it will fall further down the list of threads until it gets

pushed out by a new thread. Creating a thread that reaches the bump limit can be considered an achievement as most threads gets pushed out long before getting that much traction.[81]

This ephemeral context of threads informs how users approach making new threads. While not every opening post is striving to be the head of a big thread, a lot of them seem to be. A popular thread can sit on the front page for maybe a few hours, drawing in the attention of visitors to the board, and influence the topics of discussion on the forum during that time.

Sometimes opening posts pander to dominant discourses on the board, like the thread "what will happen when white people go extinct?". Sometimes intentionally controversial and antagonistic opening posts are made like "You are anti science". This tells of a desire from users to make posts that get a lot of engagement from other users. After all, if users did not experience any desire to create posts that got engagement, they would not be spurred into the action of making posts. However, due to the conditions of anonymous interaction, users desiring this attention need to make opening posts about what they *perceive* to be discussions of interest on the forum. In this sense, the kind of content that gets a lot of engagement on the forum disciplines users into what content *should* appear on the board. This sensitivity to what content counts as quality goes hand in hand with the desire to create popular threads, again forming a dialectic between disciplining and desire.

Though most threads are somewhat spontaneous in what topics they touch on, there are another kind of threads with stable topics. These are structured around national politics, with titles like "UK general thread". A stable fixture during my period of observation was the "Trump general thread", with the opening post linking to the latest news article about the former president. Another stable thread is the "/pol/ humour thread" where users post comedic media and memes. These stable threads are started over with a fresh opening post whenever the old one disappears or reaches the bump limit, always making sure that there is an active thread for that topic.

Clicking on a thread takes you to a chronological list of all the replies belonging to that thread. The chronological layout could lead you to believe that a thread is a linear structure, but this is very much not the case. Users reply not only to the opening post but also to other replies, creating a tree-like structure with branches of conversations. Many users leave just one reply in a thread. Others linger, engaging in longer dialogues, or sprinkling comments on many other replies. Untangling these conversational strands is part of the user experience. From one

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[81] In Hine et. al., 2017, the mean number of posts per thread is ~38 and the median is 7.

post you can see links to all replies to that post, and from a reply you see a link to the post it replied to.

This game of untangling is integral to the user experience of the forum. On 4chan, reading a thread is not just a matter of scrolling and reading, it requires interaction to be comprehended. And the design gives you all the tools needed for this game of comprehension. Clicking from reply to reply, seeing the discussion take shape, and then going back to earlier parts of the thread and repeating the process with another strand makes me feel like an active participant, even if I am myself not writing any comments.

This game of untangling, the interaction for comprehension, requires intention. The user must *want* to understand the contents to engage with the systems of the forum. This means that the user's affects are moved to desire comprehension and that they then act on this desire. The affect that moves the user to understand the forum is then articulated by the actions needed for the untangling. By clicking and moving through the threads the user performs an articulation of the self in relation to the forum.

According to Mouffe, this insertion of the social agent (the forum user) into a signifying practice (the game of untangling) gives the forum user a form of subjectivity.[82] That is, though interaction with the site, the user gains the identity of forum user.

The desire needs to be strong enough to move the actor into action. If the desire were not sufficiently strong, the actor would simply not engage in the action. This means that difficult actions/signifying practices require stronger affect, and stronger desire/affect should mean that the identity acquired through the signifying practice is stronger. Concretely this means that those who *do* understand how the forum works, by having overcome the forum's high barrier to entry, experience a stronger affective bond to the site.

These systems of tangled threads also have a distinctly live aspect to them. The content of the site is as I have mentioned in a constant state of flow, with new content being produced and old content being deleted. Everything that is on the site is active and happening now. When you reach the bottom of the thread you can often just refresh the page and see another ten or twenty replies pop up. The new replies in turn engage with previous comments, further building on established strands, and makes the reader continue the game of untangling. I often found myself with multiple threads open in different browser tabs, and when I was caught up with all the comments in one thread, I switched over to another one to see the new comments there.

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[82] Mouffe, 2018, p. 73.

Seeing the thread expand before your eyes and knowing that in a few hours all the comments will be gone, invokes a feeling of "being there when it happened". Even if the "it" that was happening was otherwise unremarkable. It carries the affect of watching a live performance.

This way of interacting with the site makes it clear that it is not just medium in the sense that it is a bearer of meanings created by the other users, a place for human–human interaction to take place. The forum as the medium for these interactions also creates new meanings as it shapes the interactions' circumstances, creating meaningful technology–human interaction. The technology–human interactions on the site are, as we have seen with the game of thread untangling, also a source of affects, inscribing itself in discursive understandings and forms of identifications for the humans in the interaction.

This affect to the technology itself and the identifications it causes is important when considering the internet as a wider ecology. Screenshots from 4chan often circulate on other social medias. For someone with identification from the interaction with the technology, the screenshots carry more meaning than just the text of the post depicted. They also carry the meanings of the aesthetic elements and the systems of threads in which the depicted post originally existed. Seeing screenshots from 4chan reignites the affects to this technology, making the emigrated user desire returning to the site's infrastructure.

4.5 Memes

I mentioned how when on the frontpage what usually grabs my attention is the comments. The comments or replies are what the bulk of the board's content consists of. In this section I examine how memes function on the site to create forms of identification,

When I first began my observations of the board, it struck me just how little of the discussions I understood. Indeed, Colley and Moore highlight the fast-evolving language of the site as both challenge for researchers, but also for new users.[83] Users engage creatively in how words are used. Unusual spellings or inflections are common, and often memetically build on earlier abstractions of the language. This makes it difficult for new users, who are not caught up on the vernacular, to parse what is being said.

As I discussed in the section about anonymity, decoding meaning without much context can often be near impossible. In this with the linguistics there is however context to work with. The vernacular has been evolved by the community, so meanings of words are often somewhat

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[83] Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 7–8.

fixed. This means that it is possible to use sources such as Urban Dictionary where many phrases are explained by users. While it may not guarantee that the interpretations made are what the articulator intended, it will likely be the interpretations made by new users of the forum.

While I would consider myself familiar with general internet slang, I found myself frequently having to rely on Urban Dictionary to figure out what meaning the words carried in this space. I also found Wikipedia's *Lists of pejorative terms for people* to be a useful resource, as the case often was that words which I did not understand were emerging hate-speech, targeting various minority groups. As Tuters and Hagen argue, the board may be considered as a "site of innovation for new and extreme modes of political speech."[84]

As I mentioned earlier, specifically the hate speech was a difficult aspect of the forum for me to tackle when I immersed myself in the field. That a big part of what makes the board's community's vernacular unique is due to the hateful language made me question how much of the field I actually had access to. As seen in Colley and Moore's study, the users of the board can react antagonistically to being observed.[85] And while I remained an invisible observer, I still saw frequent discussion about the board being infiltrated:

> – The majority of threads here are cultural marxist, D&C or to induce fear…
> – …And the board is full of glowies, careful what you say.
> – …Glowies archive and save every thread and post made on this site…

"Glowie" is a term usually used for infiltrators from the legal authorities, but it also seems to be able to refer to anyone who does not actually belong to the in-group of the board. While "glowie" is also used to dismiss other users when in an argument, that a specific term for hostile infiltrator exist can be interpreted as the group having a clear and strong sense of self. And possibly also that they have keened their senses when it comes to detecting outsiders.

While I am obviously not part of the in-group, and thus the idea of being identified as a "glowie" does not concern me in the sense that I want to appear as though I am one in the group, I am still counting on my ability to decode and interpret the collective meanings on the board. That the group is so closed off in terms of vernacular, and that I initially had a hard time understanding the collective meanings, at times makes me worried that I have actually not listened closely enough to be able to make legitimate interpretations, that I have overestimated the access I have to the field. At the same time, the group only communicates through the

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[84] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2232.
[85] Colley & Moore, 2020.

board, and for it to even be possible for new users to "get inside", there must be a way to understand the collective meanings by observing the board. That my material is on the larger side for a qualitative study also allows me to make cross references, making me reasonably sure that I have made a valid decoding of the board.

The notion of the vernacular- and meme-based in-group is by Tuters and Hagen inserted into Mouffe's theoretical framework of discourse/affect. By viewing the use of memes as participation in a language game, Tuters and Hagen argue that the community surrounding the meme develop affective bonds as members of an in-group.[86] Since not every meme on /pol/ carries politically offensive connotations, there is then an affective in-group simply based around the understanding of memes. I would combine this notion with the previously discussed affect in relation to the technology of the site to argue for a strong affective in-group of 4channers that is in some sense separate from the political identifications of /pol/. While this general site in-group might not be the most significant when it comes to the establishing of political subject positions on /pol/, it lays the groundwork for common identification with other users of the forum.

This group identity may also be closely related to the anonymous aspect to the forum. As Tuters and Hagen writes:

> *Instead of connected networks of user accounts, memes alternatively allow otherwise complete strangers to demonstrate and negotiate in-group belonging through their vernacular fluency.[87]*

This could suggest that the anonymity makes for stronger affective connection to the memes themselves, as symbols of the in-group. That is, since the groups common identification is based around the forum and the use of memes present there, the memes articulate the affect of belonging.

There is another aspect in which anonymity intersect with memes on the forum. Christopher "Moot" Poole, the founder of 4chan, argued in 2011 that memes in anonymous spaces are unique as for the meme to be adopted and modified it needs to be a good idea that the community can get behind, and that the lack of personal ownership of the content gives the community as a whole the ownership of the content.[88] This relates to an idea of the free marketplace of ideas that I discussed in relation to moderation. While it is true that memes gain

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[86] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2222, 2226.
[87] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2225.
[88] Beyer, 2014, p. 6.

traction because they are deemed to be of some good quality, it is important to acknowledge that what is deemed good quality depends on the community. In a community like /pol/, where the dominant discourses are fascistic, the "good ideas" for content will likely align with this discourse. We can see this in the popularity of antisemitic memes like the triple parenthesis or the happy salesman.

Tuters and Hagen argues that memes are examples of floating signifiers.[89] Floating signifiers can be injected with meaning as they are signs subjected to active discursive struggle, their meanings are not fixed. For Tuters and Hagen this makes memes potent for creating chains of equivalence in populist discourses, as the same meme can become a symbol for subject positions in a variety of discourses, thus creating broad allegiances.

That memes which are symbols for group identity can be injected with other political meaning creates difficulty in interpreting the memes. Similar to how it can be nigh impossible to distinguish the ironic from the genuine on the forum, it can be difficult to know if someone is using a meme to signal belonging to the forum in-group or as carrier of political meaning. But, as I argued in the section about anonymity, distinguishing the genuine articulation from the ironic one is not as important for this discursive analysis as what the articulation does to develop the discourses of the forum. The memes are also developing discourse as they can be interpreted to simultaneously carry both the meaning of signalling community belonging and the political meaning, fortifying the relation between the in-group and the political meaning, and allowing the two meanings to slip together.

An example of this is the Yes Chad meme. It is an image of the head of a blonde man with a big beard and blue eyes in profile. It is often used in a comic format with some other wojak variation where the Yes Chad represents confidence. In this sense the meme can carry whatever meaning it is given.
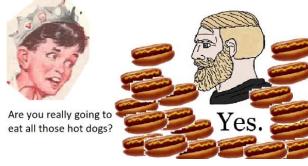

Figure 2: Example of a Yes Chad meme

[89] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2227.

On /pol/ the Yes Chad is often used to represent the idea of an aryan master race, and the regular meaning of confidence is applied to let the Yes Chad argue in favour of race science among other things. So, when coming across a Yes Chad meme that is not explicitly expressing fascist opinions on the board, it can still be interpreted to carry the fascist connotations.

With this slippage of meaning, it is possible that the affect of belonging associated with the meme is also directed toward the political meaning. This could make it difficult for even the user to distinguish between the two meanings. That is, that the affective bond toward the group is also applied to the political meaning, making the user equate their belonging to the group and support of the political meaning. When discursive projects begin to claim ownership of popular memes on the forum, this process can be deliberately radicalizing.

Another aspect of the radicalizing nature of memes on the board is the /pol/ humour threads. These are threads for users to share humorous content with each other. Not all images in these threads are memes, but a fair share is. The stated purpose of memes in this context is to get a humorous response, and thus the meanings of these memes are not necessarily pertaining to the political. In one humour thread a user questioned why these kinds of threads exist, leading another user to reply:

> humor threads are important because it's a good way of redpilling [new users] and other [r-slurs][90]

I interpret this to mean that the memes touching on politics in these threads are to introduce new users to the discourses on the site by portraying them in a humorous manner, as well as the threads existing to draw in new users to the board who then would seek out more content. By placing the memes in a context where they explicitly are to be interpreted comedically, users are disciplined to have a humorous response in which they are assenting to the meme's political meaning. This causes affect towards the memes as a system of reference, and to the in-group of users engaged in the use of these references. It also allows for the previously mentioned slippage of meaning between affect and political meaning.

The political memes can also be seen through the perspective of the disciplining–desire dialectic. Users who desire the affects of the humorous and comprehension of the memetic vernacular are disciplined into the political discursive/affective forms of identification of the in-group.

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[90] "Redpilling" is, as discussed in a previous note, 4chan slang for radicalizing. The r-slur is ableist hate-speech, but on 4chan it seems to be used as synonymous to "idiot" and similar words.

4.6 In-board antagonism

In this section I discuss how antagonism between users on the board channels different forms of affect, creating allegiances and oppositions, and disciplines the community into producing certain kinds of content.

When I started my fieldwork on the board, what struck me was how angry and hateful everyone seemed to be. I mentioned earlier how much of the language is some form of hate-speech targeting minorities. But antagonism takes many forms on the board as users also act aggressively towards other users. Disagreements are often articulated by berating the poster rather than engaging in discussion about the topic. These antagonistic expressions make up a large part of the posts and examining the shapes of these antagonisms can tell us a lot about how discourses are constructed on the forum.

I view the antagonistic articulations on the board as expressions of discursive struggles. The antagonisms show the heterogeneity of discourses present on the board. While it is possible to identify fascist/neo-nazi dominant discourses on the board, by examining the antagonisms it is clear that they are not unchallenged. The dominant discourses constantly engage with discursive projects on the board which reject the fundamental principles of extreme nationalism and race science. But the dominant discourses are also subject to struggles with projects that agree with the fixed meanings of the nodal points, but disagree with the meanings of less privileged signs. This creates sub-discourses within the dominant discourses. With this in mind the discursive struggles on the board can be placed on a scale of magnitude, depending on how central the signs struggled over are to the respective discourses.

The more the discussion parties agree about, the less antagonistic you would expect the discussion to be. Mouffe's distinction between the antagonistic relation of enemies and the agonistic adversarial relationship, can be used to analyse how different political projects interact in the political arena.[91] The agonistic relation requires the parties to agree on fundamental issues, which many of the discursive struggles on the board seem to do. Yet, antagonistic positions and articulations are the default mode of discussion on the board. Even slight disagreements can be met with aggressive antagonism.

This common refusal to change the antagonism to an agonism is addressed by Tuters and Hagen who attribute it to the "transgressive attitude of anonymous imageboard subculture".[92] The freedom of anonymity can then be said to allow the subversion of all forms of societal

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[91] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 52.
[92] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2220.

correctness, not only that which would be described as political correctness. In this perspective the linguistic aggression can be seen as bearing more meaning than the contents of the political disagreement. The anonymous user is aggressive toward the other, not because they fundamentally disagree and cannot find any common ground, but because they do not face any repercussions for being aggressive.

Ludeman refer to this atmosphere of antagonism as the "trollgeist", the spirit of the troll.[93] They write that users must always be vigilant for potential trolling in the form of aggression, antagonism, and ambiguity. I would say that this antagonistic culture of aggression is one way the board's users discipline each other. After being immersed in this antagonism for a bit I became accustomed to it; users are ready to at the drop of a hat go off on antagonistic spiels at each other. The affects of antagonism are constantly floating around between users, and engaging with this affect could be seen as participating in the in-group.

Tuters and Hagen mention how users have ritualized opposition, and by testing each other's fluency in the vernacular and attempting to out-provoke others, users negotiate relationships of superiority.[94] This display of antagonism in the back-and-forth between users was hypnotic, and very effective at moving affects in me. When a post articulated how the opposition just didn't get it, I felt the frustration. When a post used creative language, combing parts of the vernacular, displaying fluence, I felt admiration. I laughed when posts made jokes, often at others' expense. The humour was particularly impactful. Even when it used offensive language I felt the affect that was channelled, which in turn made me feel shame because I somehow briefly enjoyed this morally awful content. By engaging with the jokes, I had engaged with the far-right discourses, accepted them as the premise for the joke. I experienced the affects, even if I rationally knew that the articulation went counter to everything I believe, the affects circulating in the space overpowered this rationality. While they only occurred a handful of times, these experiences made it so abundantly clear to me how the affects in the space were disciplining me into accepting the discursive framework they were articulated within.

Interestingly enough, the dedicated humour threads of contextless memes and other content did not affect me in the same way at all. It was difficult to engage with the humour threads, as when I read them I often felt bored and offended by the content. The context provided by the antagonistic interactions between users made the channelling of affect potent.

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[93] Ludeman, 2018, p. 98.
[94] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2225.

It also gave the sense that the primary target of the antagonism was not groups of people and minorities, but the specific user being antagonized, which mitigated the offensiveness of the content somewhat. But this is not likely a universal experience, users with dispositions that already align with the discourses on the board may more readily accept the premises for the offensive jokes existing outside user-to-user antagonism.

Another powerful affect in the antagonisms between users were the second-hand embarrassment. In the antagonistic battle of provocation there occasionally appeared posts that I found awkward and cringey. Other users often reacted to these posts too, making it clear how "bad" and "poor quality" they were. Here affects also came in to discipline me into the understanding of what kind of posts were tonally appropriate. The affect of cringe is a consequence of the ritualized opposition of vernacular fluency, and that opposition is also what provides the affects akin to pride when users perform well within the framework of the hierarchical vernacular fluency. The affects of cringe and triumph are two sides of the same coin within this user-to-user antagonism.

The channelling of antagonistic affects may very well be the thing that stands out to me the most after the fieldwork. The drama of the arguments happening in real time on the screen had an intensive pull. The constant and sudden movement of affects acted counter to the repulsion I felt from the offensiveness of the expressions. So, I can really see were this anon is coming from when they say:

> Why are any of us here you massive, sagging twat? For entertainment. Your impotent frothing bile is funny.

This can be interpreted within the disciplining–desire dialectic, the users' desire for the antagonistic culture informs their actions to make articulations that reproduce the antagonism. The articulations then discipline users into desiring the antagonism.

The antagonisms in interactions between users use some standard phrases, or scripts. Ahmed argues that emotions in texts provide a script, and that the reader can accept the invitation and become the addressee of the text by aligning themselves with the discourses articulated in the text.[95] In the setting of the board I would argue that the script extends beyond the "you" of the text. When in an antagonistic articulation, the script would rather discipline the reader into aligning themself with the articulator, and against the "you" of the text. Common phrases like variations of "kill yourself" or "fuck off" articulate affects of aggression, but when I read these, because I was not the addressee, I would typically not experience affects of

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[95] Ahmed, 2014, p. 12.

defensiveness or hurt, but rather aligning myself with the articulator, and experiencing affects of aggression.

These antagonistic scripts are also related to the construction of subject positions. When subject positions are used as pejoratives to dismiss other users, the readers are disciplined into accepting these subject positions as carrying negative value. This also reinforces the construction of the subject positions made in other situations on the board, and makes the space hostile towards the minorities whose subject positions are being weaponized.

The aligning myself with the articulator became extra noticeable when I, from time to time, found a user expressing opinions I agree with. In these cases, it was especially amusing to see anons who disagreed get antagonized. The instant us versus them dynamic became motivator to stay in the thread and see it unfold, to see how my ally would fare in the antagonistic landscape. These were the moments when I was most tempted to post myself, to join in with the anon on "my team" and make fun of our antagonists.

But this temporary allyship also made me less distanced from the antagonism directed toward my ally. Since we held similar beliefs in this topic, attacks on my ally also became attacks on me in a sense. This strengthened the positive affective bond to the ally, while putting me in a clearer opposition toward other users.

Seeing someone I agreed with was also a catalyst for the sudden realization that so many of the opinions floating around the board were just bad opinions when compared to the ones presented by my ally. The frustration from seeing all these bad opinions felt like it could be relieved if I just typed out some angry messages at the strangers on this board. The affects of aggression and antagonism that were floating around the board had the potential to act as a channel for my own affects of antagonism.

It would seem to me as though the milieu of antagonism makes the non-antagonistic interactions have more impact. It was rare for me to see users expressing agreement to each other. The design of the forum makes expressing agreement take effort. Since there is no function that allows users to simply "like" others' posts, agreements must be written out as comments. The makes the moments of affirmation personal. Here, there too are scripts. Phrases have established themselves as go-to when expressing agreement, such as "based" and "fpbp" (first post best post) make it clear what reaction I am "supposed" to have to the posts.

The fact that someone needs to take time to respond makes the peer-recognition special, can also been seen the community is using affection to discipline each other. Getting a "fpbp" requires you not only to make a good post, but to be the first one to comment on an opening post. This motivates the users to quickly come up with a response that will pander to the general

userbase, and thus the dominant discourses. Successfully doing so grants you the rare reward of affirmation and affective bonds.

This affirmation would be the motivation behind users participating in the use of offensive memes to signal belonging that Tuters and Hagen mention.[96] For example, one of the posts in my material with the most "fpbp" responses is a violently transphobic meme. In this sense it is possible that minorities and oppression are used as props in comedic posts, not necessarily intended to primarily invoke hate, but to get a positive affective response.

In this way users can discipline each other by channelling specific positive affects. Giving certain types of content positive affective responses can be seen as positive reinforcement, showing both the poster who made the "good" post, and everyone else in the thread, what behaviours are appreciated. Users may then model the behaviour, not primarily because of its political implications, but because they desire the positive affective response. Whether the users believe the political implications or not, they still reproduce the discourses for more users to see. And in doing so, they align themselves with the premises of hate within those discourses.

Apart from showing what content others should make, this disciplining also shows what content is supposed to be met with positive response, expanding the disciplining apparatus as more users get a sense for what "quality content" means on the board. The readers are thusly also disciplined into the accepting the premise of the discourses that the "quality content" exists within.

4.7 Reactionary subject positions

In this section I analyse the board's dominant discourses from the perspective of how they create political subject positions and develop their discourses in relation to them. I also discuss how the discourses create a reactionary culture on the board, and compare the affects in the dominant discourses with fascist recruitment propaganda.

One consequence of the widespread antagonism on the board is that users are always developing discourses. By constantly engaging in the discursive struggles that antagonistic expressions entails, discourses are always being articulated and negotiated.

When articulating the discursive struggles on the board, it is rare for it to be a general discussion about different discursive projects. Most commonly the struggles are centred around specific political issues. As users make threads about news and current events, like new

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[96] Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2232.

guidelines for wearing masks to fight the covid pandemic, or a protest for reproductive rights, specific discourses are created.

In Mouffe's terms, what it means to support a political project is to have created forms of identification that are both discursive and affective.[97] The common political goals create affective in-groups of people supporting the discursive projects. So, in agreeing on specific issues, users form in-groups of anti-maskers, anti-feminists, anti-trans, etc.

The formation of an "us" is according to Mouffe constructed against an out-group, a "them".[98] That is, for there to be any meaningful identification of an "us" there need to exist a "them" from which the "us" is separate. In the specific discourses on the board, users often antagonise a perceived opposing side of the issue. This means that while disagreement and antagonism between users is common, a lot of antagonism is directed toward entities outside the board. A thread can be full of posts agreeing with each other, but still engaging antagonistically against non-present enemies. By identifying whom these enemies are, subject positions are created for the out-groups.

Many of the specific discourses that appear on the board are centred around subject positions. What I have noticed in these cases is that the discursive enemies often are constructed using the same subject positions that are nodal points in the discourse. For example, in discourse about reproductive rights, "women" are used to refer to both supporters of reproductive rights, and women in general. The different meanings of the subject position merge.

Here it is important to address how subject positions are constructed within the dominant discourses of the board. This is because subject positions of women, non-whites, and Jewish people are nodal points in these discourses, and they are all examples of how subject positions are constructed by merging supporters of political projects with ethnicities and gender.

The construction of these subject positions in the dominant discourses are based around rehashed race science and biological essentialism. The biological essentialism is especially related to intelligence, with everyone except white men being constructed as non-intelligent and thus also sub-human. Though not all white men are equal in these discourses, the concept of "degeneracy" is used to disqualify swaths of subject positions regarding sexuality, gender expression, and political beliefs. All these subject positions can be called the nebulous Others.

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[97] Mouffe, 2018, p. 76.
[98] Mouffe, 2005, p. 15–6.

Here it should be clear that the "us" of /pol/ is white men. By constructing the out-group, the in-group is also constructed. Thus, the inferiority of the Others is turned into identifications of superiority for the "us". Although the board is anonymous, the hostility of the discourses toward any minority can be seen as rejecting them entry. As a queer person it was very obvious that I was not welcome on the board, and that if I wanted to stay anyway, I would have to bear that my identity was used as a pejorative and frequent posts wishing people like me would die.

By placing such significance in the subject positions of gender and ethnicity on the board, I would argue that users are disciplined into observing, and placing weight on their own respective identities. By thinking about themselves in relation to the dominant discourses, users identify with subject positions in those discourses.

The subject positions of the Others are not only constructed as inferior to the "us", but they are also enemies by being constructed as involved in political projects opposing the "us". Here, these subject positions of the Others are linked by chains of equivalence in the dominant discourse, posing as the threat of the replacement theory. Replacement theory in the dominant discourses is the idea that white men, the "us", are being replaced, by women, by non-whites, and by Jewish people. This is commonly articulated as "white genocide", but replacement theory is also present in discourses about women and queer people. An example of this is how trans women often are constructed as men having been turned away from masculinity by feminism.

The replacement is in the dominant discourses constructed to be orchestrated by the Jewish ruling class. This construction of a "them" is particularly interesting. By constructing the Jewish ruling class' defining traits to be a form of political hyper-agency, with conspiratorial control, the "us" is by contrast implied to be powerless and lacking agency.

The antisemitic conspiracy theory is the glue of the discourses, as all bad things can seemingly be attributed to stem from the Jewish elite. This narrative, of replacement, and of Jewish world domination, provides the context for all the discourses around specific political issues, connecting everything in the chains of equivalence. The specific political issues thus act as examples of the legitimacy of the dominant discourses' narratives and explanations for the decayed state of society.

The specific discourses are often typically reactionary responses to progressive discourses working for increase in democracy. Replacement theory is the culmination of this, as the call for equality from minorities are interpreted as a call for less rights for the "us". By presenting the subject positions in race scientific terms of hierarchies, pride is mobilized as a matter of biological determinacy. This becomes especially poignant when the dominant

discourses present the progressive discourses as attacking the user specifically for this biological aspect of your person. Users are disciplined into affects of pride in their identification as white and masculine as a political defence. This defensive pride can be seen in the flier campaign "It's okay to be white" that was started by the board.[99]

What I find interesting is that in the dominant discourses the progressive discourses reacted to are constructed as hegemonic. With the construction of the Jewish ruling class, any discourse that seem threatening to the "us" can be placed within the antisemitic conspiracy theory, and be given the status of hegemony. This also frames the dominant discourses, not as reactionary, but counter hegemonic.

This discursive structure has a lot of affect flowing through it. The construction of subject position of the Others put a lot of emphasis on mobilizing disgust, hate, and anger. The replacement theory mobilizes affects of fear, anger, and frustration. Since the subject positions of the Others and the replacement theory are so discursively intertwined, the affects they invoke are also meshed. The fear of replacement is connected to the disgust of those who are the replacers, the frustration of not being able to stop the replacement connected to anger at the forces responsible for it.

For me seeing the articulations pertaining to this aspect of the discourses also hand an affective impact. It was however not in the way that the discourse clearly wanted me to be affected. Instead of feeling pride in my whiteness, I felt disgust at the notion of white supremacy. I did not feel fear when white genocide was brought up, I felt pity for the individuals that were so threatened by the notion of equal rights, and anger at their inability to see past their privilege. This was a difficult part of the forum to observe. I often left sessions where I had been immersed in these discussions nauseous and having to take multiple days off from the board to get my spirits back up. Variations of these discussions were to some degree present in every thread I read, and I often worried that my reaction to them made me disconnected from the perspective I was trying to examine the material from. At the same time, my reaction was reassuring in the sense that I did not feel that the risk of me getting redpilled was particularly significant. This in turn allowed me to take steps into higher immersion, which made it possible to engage with the discourses in the way I detailed in the previous section.

By the dominant discourses being framed as counter hegemonic, the threat of replacement is legitimised by assigning it hegemonic power. The power and legitimacy of the

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[99] Anti-Defamation League, 'From 4Chan, Another Trolling Campaign Emerges', *Anti-Defamation League* (blog), 6 November 2017.

threat is integral to mobilizing emotion, as a weak and illegitimate threat won't stir up the same amount of fear, frustration, and anger. The stakes are constructed to be extremely high.

The emotions invoked by the construction of the hegemonic threat in turn justifies the antagonistic and hateful articulation against the progressive discourses and associated subject positions on the board. The progressive discourses and their proponents *are* enemies to the "us" in the dominant discourses. The relation is clearly one of "either we eliminate them, or they eliminate us". This antagonistic relation motivates further reaction from the board's community against the progressive discourses, creating a culture where it is expected of users to comment on threads to make antagonistic articulations regarding specific political issues. This expectation to participate in reactionary engagement disciplines users into aligning themselves with the reactionary discourses to be a part of the community of the board.

Two core ideas in the dominant affective/discursive constructions of subject positions are the in-group's *victimhood* and *superiority*. These two identifications run through the disciplining apparatus of the affective/discursive mindset. The "us" is constructed as being deserving of better than it currently has it. This desire to power is turned by the construction of superiority to a desire for everyone other than the "us" to suffer for hindering the in-group's rightful claim to power.

Some of the emotional mobilizations pertaining to replacement are the same as those observed by Westberg's analysis of fascist recruitment material.[100] That the dominant discourses of the board share discursive and affective framing with material designed to recruit people into a fascist organization implies the potential the dominant discourses have for inviting readers into forms of political identification within them. But what I find more interesting is what the articulations on the board are missing when compared to the recruitment material, namely channelling of hope for a bright future.

In Westberg's analysis, hope is what is inspiring the ideal reader to political action, to organize within the nazi movement for a future beyond the current despair.[101] On /pol/, where the discourses are disconnected from political organization, the construction of the current state of society as an inescapable "clown world", where the in-group is victimized despite their supremacy, seems to be generally cynical.

In one opening post, the OP states that they have lost their will make jokes about politics because "thing got way too real". Comments second this:

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[100] Westberg, 2021, p. 226.
[101] Westberg, 2021, p. 225–6.

- I've become so damn cynical it's hard to see anything good in this world.
- It isnt funny. We are being subjected to genocide.

Ahmed writes that hope is what presses on us to act politically to make the future ours.[102] Without the hope it is difficult to see in what point there is for any political action. The desire for a "better" society is not placed in a discursive project that presents solutions to achieve that future. Instead of hope, there is despair, which fuels the frustration, anger, and fear.

The only political act that I saw constructed on the board was unbridled violence. Users are excited by the thought of a civil war in the wake of Black Lives Matters protests. Some express frustration regarding the online discourse's lack of action. The construction of the "us" as powerless and without agency in contrast to the Jewish ruling class actually seem to stifle political organization on the board. The discursive/affective practices dominant on the board can direct affect to fear, despair, frustration, anger, and pride, but it seems to have a difficult time translating this into a political praxis other than calls for mindless violence against everyone constructed as inferior.

That is not to say that users will not take their redpilled insights to local organizations. Johnson shows that while it may not lead to organization, the identifications of conspiracy narratives and their affects of fear can certainly lead to acts of domestic terrorism.[103] There also exist precedent of political trolling campaigns emerging from the board, such as the aforementioned "it's okay to be white". But even such campaigns seem more cynical than hopeful.[104]

One thing that the dominant discursive/affective framework misses, which typical forms of far-right discourse have, is the nodal point of the nation-state. In Westberg's material, the nationalistic aspect of the discourse is what enables forms of identification as the nation's people.[105] The nation's people is the discursive identification that informs desires, but more importantly, action. The international nature of the board makes it difficult to establish such national discourses. While the dominant discourses are undoubtedly nationalistic, they are fractioned between many different nations. This make them face the same problem as the leftist discourses on the forum, namely that they are not able to create chains of equivalence across the board. There are threads for national politics, but they are in definite minority to the

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[102] Ahmed, 2014, p. 184.
[103] Johnson, 2018, p. 100.
[104] Anti-Defamation Leauge, 2017.
[105] Westberg, 2021, p. 224.

international threads. And discourses are often centred around the US, but these discourses are frequently turned into antagonisms from users representing other countries.

This could be seen as the nationalist discourses are working against identification within this potential political project, as users dismiss political struggles in other countries as not concerning them. The "us" gets splintered depending on national identifications. Thus, the primary forms of identification that the dominant discourses can establish are that of whiteness and masculinity.

Without the discursive element of the nation through which the discursive/affective practices can establish forms of identification, the far-right discourses cannot effectively convert the identifications that they do construct into affects hope and desire to act to create this hopeful future.

5 Conclusion

stay brainwashed because you can't submit to the fact that i'm right.

–Anon

In many ways, the design of 4chan encourages democratic collectivism. It has no hidden algorithmic sorting of content, the content that get a lot of engagement from the community is what rises to the top of the page. Anonymity means that there is no social status influencing what ideas takes root, and that users do not have to fear consequences for presenting controversial ideas. The design does not encourage binary communication of like/dislike, but articulation of argument, which fosters discursive struggle.

These designs also make a space enabling creative cultural expression. It shapes the culture of the board, not as a space for individual creators, but for collective forms of creativity. Encouraging modification and evolution. A space that is unique and in which users can be a part of something that is bigger than themselves. It has no hierarchies that are not decided on by the community itself.

With only the functional design in mind, the forum actually seems like an attractive space. A democratic marketplace of ideas, both in political discussion, and cultural creativity, unbound by convention. This is in stark contrast to a web that is increasingly ruled by market interests, designing spaces not primarily for users, but for advertisements. Where discussion is

encouraged only as long as it serves to sell something. Fostering the hegemonic consensus of post democratic society.

This makes 4chan a space ideal for people wanting to escape this consensus. And by some happenstance, we are now in a situation where the collective space of 4chan's /pol/ is dominated by fascism.

What I have done in this thesis is examined how discursive/affective practices and processes produce political radicalization on /pol/. The generalized conclusion to this examination is that all interaction on the board happens in relation to the dominant fascist discourses. By all interaction being inscribed in fascist discourse, users are made to adopt fascist identification to be part of the board, which produces radicalization.

Here there is a dialectic between the desire to be on the board and the apparatus that disciplines users into reproducing the dominant discourses. The disciplining apparatus also functions as a filter, where users whose desire to be on the board is not sufficiently strong will simply leave the space when they are faced with the disciplining. The desire to be on the board is, in a sense, the desire to be disciplined by the practices present on the board. The practices include the memetic vernacular, the antagonistic mode of communication, the participation of the live threads, but also the reproduction of fascistic discourse through these other practices. To enjoy the jokes, you have to accept the premisses, which are dominantly set by the fascist discourses.

In becoming part of the "us" of the site through understanding of the memetic vernacular, and other cultural norms, users also become part of the political "us" of white masculinity. This "us" is constructed by the discursive/affective practices, just like how all political meaning is constructed by these practices, through constant articulation. Accepting the importance and supremacy of white manhood is part of the disciplining process, which requires desire to be engaged with. "We" are in opposition to progressive discourses. "We" hate women, queers, Black-, Jewish-, and other non-white people. "We" use hate-speech. If one does not accept this, even if one identifies with the cultural practices like the memes and antagonism, they are not wholly part of the "us". Again, being disciplined into this identification requires the desire to be a part of the "us".

Accepting this discursive subject position of the "us" also means having the appropriate affective responses. Anger and hate towards the people trying to replace you, fear and frustration from the victimhood of being replaced, cynicism toward the world. The affective identity of the "us" also means a sensitivity to what content on the board is considered "good".

This affective sensitivity determines what posts are to be shunned, and what posts deserves to be replied to with a "based, redpilled, and fpbp".

The integration of the political discourses into all practices on the forum is key to understanding how users are shaped into political subjects by the board. No matter if you visit the board for the petty arguments, the memes, or because "your impotent frothing bile is funny" as that anon said, you are led toward fascism, or the exit. The desire to be in the space is constantly translated into fascistic forms of identification. If you do not leave, the political meanings will eventually start to seep in. Which can be seen in the very real changes to my stream of consciousness, and I entered the space with every precaution to prevent potential radicalization.

The democratic collectiveness that is promised by the website design illustrates an old dilemma of democracy: the tyranny of the majority. New users are disciplined to adapt to the majority, the dominant discourses. While the design enables users to indulge in their worst behaviours by anonymity, it does not itself encourage fascism. As seen by how the hacktivist collective Anonymous emerged from this space, the anonymous collectiveness of the design can encourage solidarity. What is maintaining the dominant discourses is the disciplining apparatus, enforced by majority rule, and users' desire to remain on the board.

I mentioned how the nationalism of the dominant discourses' political ideology seems to stifle political praxis. While users of the /pol/-board may be unable to unite under one nation, there is an interesting and amusing parallel between nationalism and how users are loyal to the forum. The majority culture clearly expresses some kind of xenophobia toward users they feel do not belong, like people posting about the virtues of Reddit, even complete with phrases like "go back to twitter". The site's technical functions as infrastructure, its cultural norms and traditions, the memetic vernacular as language, constructs the discursive space of 4chan to be nation-like. The abstract desire to be in the space could here be likened to a patriotism.

The desire to be in the space can be seen as a combination of a desire to be a part of something, and some underlying political desires that gets articulated by the discourses on the board. The feeling of lack of agency, which can be decoded from the dominant discourses' conspiratorial narratives, is arguably a consequence of the post democratic society. The desire to understand the cause for this lack of agency, and the associated desire for political agency, is something that could be re-articulated into demands for expansion of democracy. But this requires a reconciliation with the hate for the Other that the fascist discourses are able to rationalize and incorporate into their discursive narratives. How to subvert that hate and redirect the affects of lack of agency into democratic demands, is one of the biggest challenges

the left faces in the far-right. While deradicalizing the users of /pol/ may be an insurmountable task, understanding the political desires and affects that led people to that point is useful for redirecting far-right radicalization before it reaches full neo nazism.

So, did I get redpilled by /pol/? Well, if I had been this thesis would look a lot different. But even so, firm as I stand firm in my beliefs, and though I have not browsed the forum in several months, I experience that desire to return to the space. While the desire is a morbid one, it is still there. When I see certain news, I wonder to myself what the clowns over on /pol/ think about this. Seeing screenshots of funny and non-offensive posts makes me think of the good times I had researching the site. Though I dread the political discourse, seeing strangers be furious at each other online was a fun experience. Nonetheless, my desire to not be exposed to the hate of the site far outweighs my desire to go back.

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