

**Gamergate, SJWs, and QAnon: Context for the Digital Perspectives Directing Political
Discourse**

by

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*For linguistic appeal, I will sometimes refer to users and userbases with a paired parenthetical phrase. I do this for linguistic appeal, and to tie these digital texts back to the person that thought to say it.

/b/ - The Random board on 4chan.

/pol/ - The Politically Incorrect board on 4chan.

Algorithm – A digital code function authored by website developers. Algorithms on sites like Facebook and Google rely “on the capture of large amounts of detailed data about people, products, and their various attributes in order to predict behaviour.” (Andrejevic 2011, 281)

Blogging – A type of website practice. The website creator or website users can create blog posts discussing the author’s thoughts on a subject. Sandvoss describes how on DailyKos “[a]ll users can publish their own blogs, called ‘diaries’, and comment on and recommend any other blogs across the site, allowing given blogs and bloggers growing exposure through snowballing recommendations.” (Sandvoss 2013, 255) Blogging websites include WordPress, LiveJournal, LinkedIn, and Medium.

Board – A subsite of 4chan devoted to one specific topic. This is formatted as board.4chan.org/[board]/. 4chan boards are referred to with both backslashes. I have done this through the paper.

Client Application – An independent application which does not need to access the Internet via web browsers. Microsoft Outlook is an e-mail client; outlook.com is an e-mail website.

Content – Artistic material published online. This can include visual arts, Internet radio, video essays, edutainment, and more. Content can also be posts made on a microblogging platform.

Domain – A website URL. SUNY Purchase’s email domain is securemail.purchase.edu.

E-bile – As defined by Emma Jane, this “involves hyperbolic invective, sexualised threats of or fantasies about violence, and a kind of competitive nastiness.” (Jane 2014, 185)

Engage – To use a website. Websites track a user’s engagement “to drive up your usage, to keep you scrolling.” (Orlowski 2020, 19:05)

Lurking – 4chan slang; “actively watching and refreshing multiple discussions simultaneously to see whether new posts have been made.” (Bailey and Harvey 2019, 330)

Microblogging – A type of website practice. As opposed to blogging, website users share small, usually unrelated, thoughts throughout a day. Increasingly microblogging website allow for users to quickly share links and content with other users. Microblogging websites include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

Normie – 4chan slang; someone who is not familiar with 4chan or its culture.

Platform – An Internet website.

Selfie – A self-taken photograph of a person's face.

Social Network Site (SNS) – Also called social media site, social media network, et cetera. Danah boyd defines social network sites by the public or semi-public user profiles, an articulated list of connections a given user has, and the ability for other users to see these connections. (boyd and Ellison 2008, 211) SNSs include Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn.

Sockpuppet Account – A fake account intended to obfuscate a user's identity. These are typically used to send harassing comments, or to create the appearance that many people agree with an opinion.

Subreddit – A subsite of Reddit devoted to one topic, formatted as reddit.com/r/[subreddit]. Subreddits are referred to as /r/[subreddit] or r/[subreddit]; I have followed this formatting throughout.

User – A person who interacts with a website.

Introduction

One does not need political training to see the change in discourse and affect around American politics since 2016. This change was brought forward to public consciousness thanks to President Donald Trump, and what I call a xenophobic politics that appeals to the fascistic sensibilities latent in any democracy. I believe this xenophobia is a reaction to the politics brought forward by the liberal Democrat as has been symbolized by President Barack Obama. In some cases, for some people, it was not Obama's politics they resented, but the stark contrast between what they saw and what they conceptualize as 'authority' and 'normal' that offended their sensibilities. I do implicitly mean race, but I also mean a connected globe. I mean different cultures mixing together, and people in a "dominant culture" who resent those that later join. I am talking about people in a superior position who plot the demise of their apparent enemies, and those in a lower position targeting their "higher" enemies. I intended this to reflect the appeared power dynamics of harassment campaigns performed by the users of 4chan.org and Tumblr.com.¹ Republican strategist Rick Wilson remarked in 2016 that most of the 4chan users who support Trump "are childless single men who masturbate to anime." (Joseph 2016; NeatoBurrito Productions 2017) However, I wonder which dynamics can be seen as 'superior' to their opponent's 'inferior' position – considering the former boils down to several thousand anonymous people furiously writing complaints on the town notice board, and the latter constitutes several hundred

¹ The harassment campaign I will analyze was conducted on Twitter.com, not Tumblr.com. I discuss Tumblr's demographic shift partway through its section. For ease for clarity throughout this paper, I will refer to those performing left-wing textual abuse as Tumblr users.

enthusiasts critiquing a human woman like *Catcher in the Rye* to her mental and financial demise.

I did not find institutional politics as an object worth my study until approximately 2013. I had other priorities at the time, I had just graduated high school, and it took a few more years for the Capitol to rear back into my sight. Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and later administration, was a significant contributing factor to this decision. I chose this path knowing what contributions I made would be coming from a transgender individual who was deeply influenced by their emigrated single mother: solely in terms of optics, this synthesis allows for a great narrative to be made. However, as the decade of 2010 came to close and Trump's younger base became more energized by his rhetoric and actions, I found it odd that political academia had not taken the time to analyze this base's history. I came to this conclusion from the fact that most studies around 4chan discuss the site in a bubble, lacking historic context unless in terms of other critically established events. I had not realized that political scientists were simply not widely aware of this community. There is great literature about alienation and increasing literature about digital alienation. I think it is worth a close examination to see alienated people operate in a ubiquitously anonymized space.

Is the political establishment aware of 4chan's history, I had wondered? Are strategists for the Republican National Party lurking these sites to understand their new political base, like listening to a radio talk show? Did the Bernie Sanders campaign speak with fandom activists to source organizations local to that campaign stop? If campaign staff find they should cater to a group of people because of their political power, then I believe those people warrant critical study.

I describe these websites and their later actions to try to embody an Internet dynamic that has influenced much of Internet discourses. Events like Gamergate and the Great Meme War were incredibly influential to these digital communities, and these events were the stones that spurred some into embodied political action. Similar to how fandom academics justify their object of study by explaining that streets have burned because sports teams have lost, thus that affective attachment is one worth analyzing, I analyze these online communities because people on 4chan were not sincere anti-Semites in 2011; it was a repeated exposure and alignment with controversial “arguments” to dissuade those unfamiliar to 4chan’s inflammatory sensibility that led 4chan users into an ideological Slip-n-Slide towards violent extremism. 4chan is my primary study object because these users are more likely to perform violent embodied actions. Prior to 2016 4chan perceived their “enemy” as Tumblr and its userbase. I believe this fact, the demographics that were present the time, and the userbase’s later textual behaviors allows Tumblr and its community examination under this same critical eye.

Immediately following this introduction is the literature review, where I critically discuss relevant references made within my paper. In the first section I go over the history of the online right-wing by discussing the history of 4chan. My second section has the same format but describes the online fandom community by discussing Tumblr and its relationship with that site. I conclude this section by describing common themes of the community emphatically expressing their vitriol, what is now known as “cancel culture.” I discuss how a website’s layout or functionality options effect the psychology of its users in section three. I rely on testimonies collected in *The Social Dilemma* to attempt to chart the psychology of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

What observations of gender and sexuality have not already been made will be addressed in section four. Finally, in section five I discuss a radicalization effect present in both communities and accuse the presence of pseudo/anonymity as an influential source. I accuse pseudo/anonymity here because being unable to tell if your interlocuter is who they claim to be is a significant factor for not trusting them.

Literature Review

Neither alienation, nor its newer digital manifestations, are novel concepts. Mary Hanemann Lystad (1972) reviewed various empirical literature of the mid 1950s and 1960s which looked at alienation in society. Marc Andrejevic (2011) critically examined the result of private interest in Internet-based communications. Specifically, he sought “to open up some avenues for inserting questions of power, control, and exploitation” (279) for further studies about Internet privatization. He discussed three contributing factors – database manipulation (280), how social networking sites exploits users (281), and the role of surveillance, (284) – then discusses how a user’s information is alienated to them: it “returns to users in an unrecognizable form as a means of fulfilling the imperatives of others.” (286) Steffen Krüger and Jacob Johanssen (2014) saw this final point of Andrejevic’s and ran, creating a whole article titled *Alienation and Digital Labour*. They cite many studies about digital alienation dating back to the turn of the millennium, (635) and they pick at frustration expressed by social media users to see this digital alienation in practice. This is including items like a user threatening a lawsuit against Facebook on a Facebook post, (640) or a copy-pasted paragraph of legalese ostensibly meant to “prevent” Facebook from collection personal data. (641-642) As part of enrolling an account with the website, these users “*did* in fact authorize the use of their personal information when they ticked off the terms and conditions agreement as part of Facebook’s membership procedure.” (642) Krüger and Johanssen define alienation as the worker’s “failing act of identification and appropriation” with the product of their labor, “as well as the concurring feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness.” (637)

Though alienation is a concept which has a history of literature, the website 4chan lacks this couch. To my investigations, Michael S. Bernstein and team are some of

the first to conduct a large-scale study on 4chan. (Bernstein et al. 2011) The authors aimed to have their study “contribute to scholarly conversations about data permanence.” (51) I find their study valuable because this gives us a rough shape of the community to observe. They collected activity on 4chan’s random board, /b/, in a two-week span from July 19 to August 2, 2010. “This data includes 5,576,096 posts in 482,559 threads.” (53) They are able to deduct, by way of activity spikes, that “demographics of /b/ are primarily North Americans that use the website after business or school hours.” (54) The team discusses how users “communicate [their] high status in the community” by way of “textual, linguistic, and visual cues.” (56) They give the example of triforcing (creating a Legend of Zelda trifoce out of Unicode) and compares this practice to an index: “a signal whose presentation is only possible by someone with particular skill or knowledge.” (56) The team describes how “ephemerality may raise community participating”, (55) where people post in a thread solely to keep it from being deleted (this practice is called ‘bumping’). I find, in my personal experience, this is true of /b/ specifically and perhaps other boards which have a high thread deletion rate. They conclude by hoping they have opened “the door to future 4chan work. [...] Communities like 4chan have immense impact on Internet culture, and /b/’s anonymous, ephemeral community design is playing a strong role in that cultural influence.” (56)

2017 begins seeing more quantitative (and qualitative) studies done on 4chan. We also begin to see a specific focus on 4chan’s /pol/ board. Gabriel Emile Hine and team gathered a massive collection of posts and threads from 4chan’s /pol/ board. (Hine et al. 2017) The team began collecting posts on /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) on June 30th, 2016, then included /sp/ and /int/ (Sports and International, respectively) in their

collection sets on August 6th and 10th, 2016 respectively. Their dataset then continues until September 12th, 2016. However, the team continues collecting /pol/ threads and YouTube comments up to September 25th to seek evidence of 4chan raids. “We also use a set of 60,040,275 tweets from Sept. 18 to Oct. 5, 2016, for a brief comparison in hate speech usage.” (3) Hine et al portrayed a “heat map of the number of new /pol/ threads created per country”, and although “indeed nearly every post on /pol/ is in English, [they found the board] is surprisingly diverse in terms of international participation.” (4) They can collect this information because these are three boards which display the user’s country of origin: this is otherwise uncommon on the platform. They also note that “unlike many other social media platforms” (5) there is no 4chan function that can ‘read the room’ around a given post, such as Twitter’s like function or Reddit’s upvote system. “Thus, the only way for a user to receive validation from (or really any sort of direct interaction with) other users is to entice them to reply, which might encourage users to craft as inflammatory or controversial posts as possible.” (6) The additional 2 weeks of data collection the team took to track YouTube raids paid off: “examin[ing] the comments from 19,568 YouTube videos linked to by 10,809 /pol/ threads” (9) showed a correlation between the YouTube link being posted and an influx of “(detected) hateful comments”. (10) The paper also quantitatively proves /pol/’s utilization as a meme/making website, even without the specific images that were posted during the collection time. The team themselves cite that as it seems memes by definition are to be reposted numerous times,

[W]e expect /pol/ to generate large amounts of original content. To this end, we count the number of unique images posted on /pol/ during our observation period, finding 1,003,785 unique images (almost 800GB) out of a total 2,210,972 images (45%). [... W]e note that the majority (about 70%) of images are only posted once, and nearly 95% no more than 5 times. (6)

Simultaneously with my pronouncing it, I have issue with my conclusion from this finding: because the JSON API, the scraper the team used to collect the image data, does not collect the image itself (6) it is unclear if these images were unique memes to be made for propagation outside of 4chan or permutations of internal 4chan memes. Without seeing these images themselves, ideally coupled with the post it was from, it is impossible to say if these were images made for Internet users external of 4chan. The team concludes their findings, eager for “future work exploring fringe groups like the alt-right, hate speech, and online harassment campaigns.” (12)

Dillon Ludemann also analyses /pol/ discourse, but specifically he studies the scales that are expressed and “the way interaction online is affected by pseudo/anonymous websites.” (Ludemann 2018, 93) He is defining scale inside the linguistic anthropological field and is analyzing how 4chan users are “able to change the scale of their interactions from post to post, deciding whether or not to engage with a previous post as either the individual or as the “voice” of the country that the user posts from.” (94) Ludemann remarks how this linguistic shifting “has become a normal and embodied practice for users on this board.” (94) He gathered communications on /pol/ from August to November 2016, collecting over 100,000 threads, and chose three posts to critically analyze. (94) He finds that within all three of his examples, posters interacted as both themselves “as well as the powerful national ideologies or counter ideologies that accompany the flags attached to their posts.” (97) He concludes that “site architecture” and the existing culture of anonymity has “allowed 4chan users to exploit these features and extend their discursive practices beyond normally understood or accepted ranges offline.” (98) In his introduction, Ludemann admits choosing this

specific board to study because “I had become interested in the group that had come to be known as the “alt-right.”” (94) I therefore find the posts he analyzes rather salient and fine representatives of the state of discourse on/pol/. Supplementary Figure A1 is a Canadian resident who has a long, scathing reply to The Redpilled Refugee who has accused the user “FUCKING LEAF.” The quoted anon shoots back:

You invade [superior societies] like parasites, destroy them from within, and then complain about them. You do this because your disgusting race has never accomplished great things. You have never built great nations. You have wallowed in your own filth for all eternity. [...] You lack the self awareness to realize your presence is the problem. Everywhere you go turns to shit. [...] You will never have the right to call me a leaf because you are nothing.

Supplementary Figure A2 is a German resident of Turkish parents who – in seemingly good faith, based on their fluency in 4chan lingo and sincere tone of address – asks /pol/’s stance on nonviolent immigrants who otherwise contribute to society.

i can understand your hate in general and would support the idea of getting rid of these kind of immigrants. But i can also confirm that im not the only one, i know plenty of people like my kind living in this country. I also respect all opinions of yours. I wouldn't even mind sitting with a Neonazi on a table as long as he doesn't physically attack me.

The demographic profile, what little I can possibly scrape from this singular post, encapsulates a lot of what I see on 4chan: Millennial-generation men trying to grasp the “better life” his parents sought for him, raised with an experience of ostracization, seeking wisdom from an anonymous, inflammatory crowd of strangers.

Tracie Farrell, Miriam Fernandez, Jakub Novotny, and Harith Alani conducted an analysis of 5,674,303 posts from seven different subreddits, a dataset of 301,078 conversations held between June 4th, 2011, until January 11th, 2019. (Farrell et al. 2019, 92) The team “aimed at linguistically characterizing these manifestations of misogyny by building lexicons of hate” (90) that could apply for their research object, incel

subreddits. They specifically chose various incel subreddits to “aim to capture the distinct levels of hateful speech within the manosphere.” (90) The team describes the manosphere as:

a group of loosely incorporated websites and social media communities where men’s perspectives, needs, gripes, frustrations and desires are explicitly explored. [... Violent] acts were justified, in the words of the perpetrators, by a deep hatred for women, whom they perceived as having rejected and betrayed them. (87)

They define categories of lexical misogyny as Belittling; Flipping the Narrative; Homophobia; Hostility; Patriarchy; Physical Violence; Racism; Sexual Violence; and Stoicism. (90-91) Their findings, much of which are tabled and graphed, “support existing discourse analysis studies that violence and hostility are increasing toward women online.” (93)

Manuela Barreto and team analyzed the answers of 46,054 respondents to the BBC Loneliness Experiment, seeking correlations between culture, age, and gender and experienced loneliness. (Barreto et al. 2019, 2) “The results revealed significant interactions between Age X Individualism, Gender X Individualism, and Age X Gender, but no significant three-way interaction between those predictors.” (4) In the discussion portion the team makes time to mention that these interactions between variables “did not qualify the main effects, they simply accentuated them.” (4) Because the BBC survey asked respondents to answer on scale of immediate loneliness and long-term relationships, it was found that the young men who already feel lonely are “more vulnerable not only to frequent loneliness, but also to loneliness that [is] more intense and longer lasting.” (5) Barreto et al also clarify that “the effects we found were very small, although consistent across all three loneliness dimensions.” (5)

Bharath Ganesh provides a comprehensive exploration of the online spaces which he describes as the dark side of the social media platforms once used to support pro-democratic revolutionaries in states like Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, et cetera beginning in 2009. (Ganesh 2018, 30) Ganesh created this piece to critically study these people “as a challenge for governance and security rather than for media,” with an “explicitly transatlantic” (32) lens to offer American and European governments alike a clear understanding to combat these behaviours. He pointedly characterizes this group as ‘digital hate culture’, rather than as ‘alt-right’ or ‘neo-Nazi’, “to refer to the complex swarm of users that form contingent alliances to contest contemporary political culture and inject their ideology into new spaces.” (31) He begins by describing the manosphere (“an antifeminist coalition of men’s rights activists, bloggers, pickup artists and alleged experts in sexual strategy” (34)) and the associated Red Pill. To ‘take the red pill’, intentionally couched in the politics of *The Matrix* (a film I will mention directed by two transgender sisters), “is to internalize these “truths” and to develop sexual strategy based on exploiting the purported hard-wired sexual inclinations of all women.” (34) This is the red pill in the context of the manosphere, Ganesh explains. For digital hate culture,

taking the red pill means becoming aware of a totalizing view of the West as under threat by both immigrants and a range of intersecting ideologies that “appease” migrants and threaten Western civilization. This presents an extreme worldview in which all migrants, liberals, and leftists are enemies of Western, white society. This parallels the “absolutist worldviews” that sociologists have used to explain the violent radicalization of terrorists. (35)

Ganesh also credits digital hate culture’s fluid nature to “its decentralized structure, its ability to quickly navigate and migrate across websites, and its use of coded language to flout law and regulation.” (36-37) The example given is #TwitterPurge, a “coordinated

account suspension of numerous extreme right-wing accounts” conducted by Twitter’s team on December 18, 2017. (38) Host to alt-right YouTube series titled Reality Calls Tara McCarthy’s account was included in this purge; however, she already had an existing backup account. She “has since regained her thousands of followers on Twitter.” (38) Britain First leaders Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen also had their accounts purged. Britain First is “a notorious counter-jihad group that is well-known for its intimidation tactics during its mosque invasions and “Christian patrols”.” (38) Golding and Fransen were courted to move their activities to website Gab.ai by the platform’s leaders. “Gab’s lax community regulations on hate speech attract banned users from Twitter. The platform already had a reputation as one of the key hubs for members of the alt-right, anti-Semites, and neo-Nazis, and the event increased its visibility.” (38) I find Ganesh’s description of digital hate culture and of these online practices very informative, and critically analysed these sections of the report.

John Bailey and Brenna Harvey also studied 4chan behavior. (Bailey and Harvey 2019) As opposed to /pol/, the two observed /mlp/, the board dedicated to fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. They passively watched the board “for an average of 15 hours a week over the course of eight months, taking extensive fieldnotes” (329) in the meantime. This culminated in a collected 207 threads. (330) Bailey and Harvey find that the men who frequent this board continuously articulate themselves as rendered abject from hegemonic masculine heterosexuality. They found that these users are men “as evidenced through frequent references to existing or desired relationships with women, use of masculine pronouns, and incredulous reactions whenever a poster identifies themselves as a woman.” (330) Their shame “contributes to a collective representation of men as sexually disadvantaged, which bolsters a broader narrative of failing

masculinity that opposes progressive narratives of gender change.” (339) However, Bailey and Harvey “suspect that this link between sexual failure and reactionary politics is not limited to /mlp/ or 4chan. [...] Our research suggests the dynamics of sexual shame and abjection that may contribute to these political attitudes and movements.” (339) The authors sought to “shed light on online communities where stigmatized sexual tastes are similarly routinized as a point of belonging.” (326) I understand their hesitancy to pin this behavior onto a sole website. Nonetheless, I disagree with their disregard of the platform. I do attribute the users’ perspective at least partly to the website which these fans engaged on, even if this perspective is not exclusive to only 4chan.

David Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman performed a multimodal analysis of news coverage surrounding Gamergate. (Nieborg and Foxman 2019, 116) They chose articles from between September 2014 – “when significant coverage of the movement began” (116) – and early June 2016, totaling “1,283 articles from 37 outlets.” (117) One of their initial research questions was “how are journalists making sense of the movement’s emergence and evolution?” (112) They found that Gamergate “became the beat of only a few journalists”, (118) even if many authors might have reported on Gamergate or related events. For example, Todd Martens authored 44% of all Gamergate articles for the *Los Angeles Times*. (118) They found that Gamergate and later harassment events helped journalists create a narrative. Gamergate was no longer a series of events to be reported on, but “became shorthand for broader instances of mediated misogyny.” (123) This allowed journalists “a lens through which to speak about a wider culture of online misogyny in recognizable terms.” (123) The two conclude that the mainstreaming process of Gamergate “serves as an instructive case study for activists and educators to

help comprehend how news events evolve, how to contribute to them, and how to position oneself.” (126) They also conclude with the note that Gamergate’s proponents have now essentially formed their own sleeper harassment cell. “By invoking the right codes, for example labeling “opponents” as Social Justice Warriors, online hate mobs can be resurrected in a matter of hours.” (127)

Christopher Smith conducts a critical analysis of approximately 50 memes which contain the phrase ‘fake news’, collected in an 8-week period from March to April 2019 from the websites Facebook.com, Twitter.com, Reddit.com, and boards.4chan.org/pol/. (Smith 2019, 308) Smith is investigating “to determine whether [these memes] appear weaponized against a specific target and whether that attack is meant to diminish the target’s public image.” (304) He specifically conducts a multimodal critical discourse analysis, which “examines how visual semiotic choices contribute to power relations and ideologies in tandem with textual discourse.” (308) Smith found that 76% of his dataset qualified as memes which can be weaponized to destabilize news agencies and networks. (309) Smith includes an Anderson Cooper meme which utilizes his sexuality to appeal to a homophobic audience, (310) and a Jake Tapper meme with the Capitol building in repair in the background, conflating Tapper’s fake news reporting to be “suggestive of childish banter.” (313) Smith concludes this analysis by affirming that a good percentage of fake news memes are iconoclastic in this matter and that fake news memes are “significant discursive tools.” (316)

Adrienne Massanari and Shira Chess performed a visual discourse analysis of SJW memes. (Massanari and Chess 2018) SJW is an acronym for social justice warrior and is the assigned name for users of Tumblr and other vocal supporters of social justice. Visual discourse analysis allows Massanari and Chess to study the visual and

textual portrayal of these memes. (530) This group of people are specifically SJWs and not ‘social justice warriors’, partially because “SJW as a memetic straw man” (558) was a powerful discursive tool for the time. But when Massanari and Chess take one nail scratch at the veneer of the SJW they find “full of contradictions – SJW is both a warrior and harmless; it is both a disease and lacking in the ability to sustain itself with logic; it is both monstrous and toothless.” (539) The authors take the implication that “the meaning of the SJW is not fully formed or fixed yet” (539) as hopeful, that it “offers the possibility of resistance by those who might reclaim the SJW for themselves as a positive moniker.” (539) I agree that the core of the SJW remains as a fluid, amorphous gesture. However, I view this internal set of contradictions as reflective to the fact that these meme-makers view the political left as hypocrites. If the people who “champion” for gender equity aggressively refuse to listen to roughly half of all peoples, then what other principles do they flimsily stand on? I base this perspective from Figure 2 in their analysis, in the intensely hypocritical posters manipulated to be in the figure’s room. (532)

Jesse Fox, Jeremy Bailenson, and Liz Tricase conducted first-hand research on the psychological effect of sexualized avatars. (Fox, Bailenson, and Tricase 2013) They were able to study this thanks to head-mounted displays (so-called virtual reality headsets), sexualized and nonsexualised avatars as coded by other research assistants, and photographs of the participants mapped onto virtual heads. (933) 86 females constituted their research pool. (933) Participants had their faces photographed “for a presumably unrelated study,” (933) which were utilized six weeks later to be either part of the research or control group. Once participants saw themselves in a virtual reality mirror, they spoke with a male confederate (research actor). After removing the headset,

participants completed a questionnaire. (934) The team found “participants who wore a Sexualized Self expressed greater rape myth acceptance than participants who saw a Sexualized Other although there were no significant differences with the Nonsexualized Self or Nonsexualized Other.” (935) Fox and team proved “simply wearing certain avatars led women” to internalize the myth that women are at fault of their own rape. (936) I find this study vital because it is evidence that behavior experienced online can affect a person’s behavior offline.

Lily Winterwood held a survey from April 13 to 16 2017, trying to statistically quantify linguistic changes in online fandom communities. (Winterwood 2017) Winterwood testifies that having “had a Tumblr account for six years[,] I have witnessed interesting linguistic changes to the lexicon of [Tumblr’s] fannish denizens.” ([5]) She surveyed respondents for broad age categories, the frequency and length of time that respondents used their primary social media network, “as well as the platform on which they engaged in fan behavior,” ([6]) then used a five- and six-point Likert scale to determine respondents’ definitions for the four paired terms ‘discourse’ and ‘wank’, and ‘trigger’ and ‘squick’. ([7]) “I hypothesized that users who had been in fandom for [more than ten years] would have a different perception of the words wank and squick and even make a distinction between the use of these words and the use of discourse and trigger.” ([10]) She indeed finds this correlation when she narrows results to respondents who engage in fandom on the sites Tumblr.com and DreamWidth.com: that “Tumblr on average preferred discourse and trigger over wank and squick, and Dreamwidth preferred it vice versa,” even though the latter two terms were found to have similar definitions in their communities. ([11]) I find this study valuable when paired with observations about web design.

Henry Jenkins takes a critical look at the Harry Potter Alliance and its activism work to discuss an overlap that exists between affective attachment and embodied activism. (Jenkins 2012) This is not a newly developed link, one of Jenkins' sources discusses science fiction fan organizations of the 1930s and 1940s which "functioned as spaces for debating radical political ideas, recruiting fans into larger labor and social movements, and paving the way for more socially conscious forms of science fiction." ([2.4]) The Harry Potter Alliance is an organization with over 40 staff members with members and volunteers having had raised over \$100,00 for Haitian relief and having collected and donated over 50,000 books. ([3.2]) Jenkins' investigative works found that, "of the organization's 98 chapters, 24 are hosted by high schools and 33 by colleges and universities;" the median age of the HPA member is 21 years old. ([6.1]) The Harry Potter Alliance uses the language found within Harry Potter to communicate with fans about "forces that resist social justice, including many that are the targets of other kinds of activism, such as conformity, commercialization, authoritarianism, and the politics of terror." ([5.1]) Jenkins concludes by covering the issue that is the end of the Harry Potter film series and whether the five years of organization efforts provide for HPA's own momentum. ([7.2]) I find this piece valuable for providing an in-depth case study that analyses the mobilizing power of affect.

Cornel Sandvoss analyzed activity on the website DailyKos.com from September 2012 to January 2013, to argue that political enthusiasm as a type of media fandom. (Sandvoss 2013, 252) To my understanding, this is the first study to overlap these two fields. Sandvoss is looking on the website DailyKos.com because it is "the largest and most popular among American political blogging sites, claiming to reach 2.5 million viewers per month." (255) Sandvoss is looking for this attachment link by reading user-

submitted blog posts and comments on DailyKos's front page, and by selecting 300 posts of the most commented on, recommended, and bookmarked blog posts that week. (256) He points out that analyzing political enthusiasm as a type of fandom "at least partially shifts [the community's priority] from substance to form," (263) and that creating the "brand" of a candidate is not a new practice to political consultants and advertisers. (280) Sandvoss takes note of "the affective attachments between voters and political parties and politicians," (285) which is an affect that is crucial to the formation of fandoms.

Jonathan Dean argues for the theoretical inception of what he calls a politicized fandom, by describing the three fanbases for three UK political figures. (Dean 2017) Dean is analyzing a politicized fandom as opposed to a political fandom. Dean is specifically looking "to theorise the conditions under which fan communities become political." (6) He finds that politicized fandoms "are sustained by the intentional collective pursuit of a particular vision of socio-political change, in opposition to, as opposed to merely distinct from, some aspect of wider society as it is presently constituted." (12) Dean finds that fans of Jeremy Corbyn "constitutes the most fully-fledged case of politicised fandom, insofar as it consists of a (relatively) well-organised fan community as well as a clear set of political commitments." (21) Milifandom (fans of Ed Miliband) on the other hand existed as "a relatively small (yet social media savvy) coterie of politically aware young women and girls" who, although identifying communally as Milifans, "never took on a clear-cut organizational form". (19) He closes his argument by stating "that political scientists' lack of interest in fandom as a concept or object of study is unwarranted, and that a more thoroughgoing reflection on fandom

may provide a valuable addition to our conceptual toolkit” as means for 21st century civic engagement. (22)

Emma Jane studies the antifandom and subsequent discourse that revolves around cheerleaders. (Jane 2014) Antifandom is defined by J. Gray as “audience members who strongly dislike a given text, genre, or personality, yet who may deliberately seek out these objects of detestation “precisely to raise their blood pressure.”” (176) Jane studies the vitriolic texts expressed against the sport of cheerleading and those who participate in, wishing for her study to professionally acknowledge “that the targets of e-lynch mobs are not simply – or only – texts, but may also involve a human or a group of humans.” (183) She concludes that “antifans are also powerful media producers, and their targets can include human subjects who may suffer real-life pain and suffering,” especially thanks to “unprecedented rises in the celebritisation of ‘ordinary’ people via the internet and media genres such as reality television.” (184) Harassing a random Target employee simply because they went viral “raises different ethical issues because it is likely that such people are more psychologically, physically and financially vulnerable to antifan campaigns, than seasoned celebrities.” (184) I find this analysis poignant, especially when paired with cancel culture and its tropes (as I have).

4chan

4chan is a website that was created by Chris Poole, known by his moniker 'moot', in October 2003. It is an image forum website, meaning website visitors can make individual posts and optionally attach images onto a 'thread', discussion topics in a given field. In 4chan's case, example fields (called boards) include travel (/tra/), fitness (/fit/), anime (/a/), video games (/v/), fashion (/fa/), and racism and anti-Semitism (ostensibly politics, or /pol/). Typically, on forums you are unable to contribute without creating an account with the website, where the website owners have a record for your email, IP address(es), full post history, and if the website hosts Google advertising Google can track what activity you make on that site. (Orlowski 2020; Schechner and Hagey 2021) 4chan is an online pioneer because (to my investigations) it is the first Western website where users do not need to create an account to contribute to its discussion. It also pioneers in its web design a sense of non-permanence. After a certain amount of time (dictated by the volume of other posts across that board) threads are automatically deleted. Any discussion or image media included in those threads are erased alongside it: the commonly understood way of preserving posts or threads is through screen capture, having a sort of digital hard copy of what discussions occurred. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 52)

4chan has formed a community base of lonely males between the ages of fourteen and approximately 40, as admitted by Dale Beran for the documentary *Feels Good Man*. Beran authored the book *4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump*. People on the website would describe themselves as NEET – Not in Education, Employment, or Training. He says: (Jones 2020)

The idea was that they were trying to find a word that describes their situation, for these masses of kids who are unemployed or have kind of dropped out of life.

4chan really comes to embody that culture of checking out and living in your mom's basement. (17:54)

The documentary interviews two 4chan users (channers) and their experience of the site from 2014 to current day. We meet Mills, one of these users, by walking down his mother's basement with him into his room. (18:40) He tells us how at work he would check 4chan: (Jones 2020)

I would duck behind a stack of crates [to quickly be like] 'You dumb idiots,' then I'd check like, 10-15 minutes later to see who's replying to me, and I'd face an onslaught of people just saying I was the most hideous man alive. I would, you know, wear that as a badge of honor. I'd be like, "Yes. I'm a true 4chan guy. I'm a true social reject. I'm a true freak. Yeah, you're darn tooting." (22:52)

This documentary is named such because it follows the ideological shift of these website-goers by following the mutations Pepe the Frog took from between his inception to the 2016 election. Matt Furie was the original artist in 2005. This image, colloquially termed FeelsGoodMan or FeelsBadMan depending on the emotional context, was ubiquitously used across the 4chan website. In late 2014 and early 2015 celebrity pop figures Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj made references to Pepe folders and had posted edited Pepes memes onto Instagram. (25:01) Other Pepe memes were being made in other social circles on the Internet concurrent to this time. 4chan users were very upset at seeing their exclusive meme being used by normies. (25:25) In a bid to reclaim Pepe for their exclusive usage, 4chan began making politically incorrect memes to dissuade normies from wanting to engage. I say politically incorrect as a euphemism: many of these edits include Pepe personally conducting hate crimes, convey him as a member of ISIS, include racial slurs and extreme physical violence, or can depict him as the Columbine shooters of 1999. (Jones 2020, 34:12, 37:58)

Over an eight-month ethnographic observation, Bailey and Harvey found that channers who participated on the board /mlp/ (dedicated for fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*) built their communal identity around their failed, abject sexual desires and efforts. (Bailey and Harvey 2019) Bigoted behavior is not exclusive to 4chan.org. Similar behavior is found on websites such as 2chan from Japan (which 4chan was aesthetically inspired by), KiwiFarms, SomethingAwful, 8chan/8kun, and certain subsites on Reddit (called subreddits) such as /r/MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), /r/Braincels, and /r/TruFemcels. (Farrell et al. 2019) Another subreddit, /r/The_Donald, was a hub for meme-makers and quasi-professional doxxers in the 2016 American presidential campaign. (Newcomer and Bloomberg 2020)

Karl Marx termed the idea of alienation in 1844. “For Marx the history of mankind is one of increasing development and, at the same time, of increasing alienation. The process of alienation is revealed in work and in the division of labor.” (Lystad 1972, 90) After he published *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts from 1844* in 1932, several of his colleagues “produced Freudo-Marxist readings of alienation.” Some authors include Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), Herbert Marcuse (1966), and Erich Fromm (1961; 1965). (Krüger and Johanssen 2014, 633)

Longitudinal studies have been done on the effects of loneliness in humans. 30% of all industrialized citizens feel lonely, and 1 out of any 12 people feel chronically lonely. Lonely people are more depressed, irritable, self-centered, and are associated with an increased 26% premature death risk. (Cacioppo 2018, 426) A multi-national survey collected by the BBC Loneliness Experiment, of over 45,000 participants who were between ages 16-99, proved “younger men living in individualistic cultures” were the most vulnerable to loneliness. (Barreto et al. 2020, 1) Older influence from websites like

Facebook and Myspace have led to codified practices on Tinder-like dating platforms, which asks a user to interact with another user initially based on their profile picture and whatever short biography a user chooses to include about themselves. This is opposed to meeting someone in a bar or another embodied social situation, where you can interact with their charm or sense of humor which can change your opinion on their physical appearance. “But on Tinder, you’re just browsing a catalog of faces and gatekeeping who even gets to talk to you in the first place.” (Wynn 2018, 21:04) Women on dating apps are inundated with either single-word messages or men who open up asking “dick or no dick” (18:54), while men without aesthetic appeal “get radio silence” (20:41); hundreds of empty chatrooms populated by a singular ‘hey’ sent months ago to no reception. Coupling this adulthood experience of romantic rejection with an adolescent experience of social rejection is how we can conceive the modern incel identity.

Incel is a portmanteau of involuntary celibate, a term created in the late 1990s by the website Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project to create a space for people “who just couldn’t get it in.” (Wynn 2018, 1:57) Lonely heterosexual men online learned of this blog, apparently, because the word quickly associated with this group of people rather than the lonely bisexual women who originally created the term. Press media and academia concerning incels seem to arrive after 2014, which I initially found confusing: what was the inciting action to want to critically study to these people, I wondered. Elliot Rodger fatally shot and stabbed six people near the University of California, Santa Barbara campus on May 23rd, 2014, and killed himself before law enforcement could apprehend him. Before his death he wrote a 141-page manifesto and e-mailed it to a few dozen people; the next day, it emerged in full online. In what he titled My Twisted

World: The Story of Elliot Rodger, “he described himself as the “ideal magnificent gentleman” and could not comprehend why women would not want to have sex with him.” He called his massacre the “Day of Retribution” and said he had “no choice but to exact revenge on the society” that had “denied” him sex and love.” (“Elliot Rodger” 2018; The Times-Union 2014) Four years later, a Torontonionian male cheered on Facebook that “the Incel Rebellion has already begun!”, hailed “the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!”, and drove a rental van into pedestrians on the sidewalk, killing ten random people and injuring another fourteen. (“Alek Minassian” 2018) Natalie Wynn describes in her 35-minute video *Incels* how incels see women as “a kind of foreign, inscrutable object comparable to a natural resource to which all men are entitled, and to which they feel they have been unjustly denied.” (Wynn 2018, 3:14) Incel vernacular “conveys a searing resentment” (3:58) against women and feminism, which they misinterpret as the reason for their romantic failures: because feminism empowered women to seek partners in men more attractive than their “looksmatch” (a 5-out-of-10 man partnered with a 5-out-of-10 woman). Feminism encourages women to sleep with as many men as possible and partner with men for only sexual satisfaction or only financial maintenance. (10:25) To the incel, women do not partner with men out of a sincere attraction to his personality, but out of aesthetic or social calculations made to her benefit. Tracie Farrell, Miriam Fernandez, Jakub Novotny, and Harith Alani create nine categories of lexical hate to analyze various incel subreddits. Some of these categories are flipping the narrative, saying that men are oppressed by women; patriarchal language, such as the idea of ‘alpha males’ or that women must be subjugated under men; physical and sexual violence as distinct, separate categories; and what they describe ‘stoicism’, “encapsulat[ing] terms and expressions of endurance of

pain or hardship because of the lack of intimacy or beauty. Terms like ‘kiss-less’, ‘hug-less’ or ‘involuntarily celibate’ are part of this category.” (Farrell et al. 2019, 91) Bailey and Harvey describe that channers on /mlp/ frame feminism as robbing “masculinity of its benefits while preserving its strictures.” (Bailey and Harvey 2017, 337)

I have an educated hunch that Rodger’s massacre was an iceberg tipping point for this online community, for these specific people online. The weekend of July 4th 2014 saw back-and-forth raid attempts between 4chan and Tumblr, a concurrently popular website catering to a different online population which I will soon analyze. This raid was primarily one-sided, 4chan attacking Tumblr, and these “raid attacks” constituted of posting explicit material on popular general tags, such as #anime or #puppies. Some users of Tumblr tried to retaliate by posting selfies into these tags. 4chan users who were adept at Photoshop (both by virtue of statistics and being long-term Internet drama aficionados) took these selfies, pasted those faces onto hardcore pornographic images, and spammed them back onto the tag to the unsuspecting user. There is a popular fringe theory that /pol/ orchestrated this raid, as opposed to the appeared fact that a select number of Tumblr users independently tried to raid 4chan themselves. (The Internet Historian 2017) I am inclined to believe such a fringe theory. I believe this because the week after this raid, a convention called Dashcon occurred. I will go into further detail later, but Dashcon was such a logistic failure I am skeptical that the community that had so uncritically cheered this event could, even delusionally, try to organize a “raid” against a well-known Internet mobilization machine. These events are set up to a far-more impactful harassment event.

On August 16th 2014, game developer Zoe Quinn’s blog updated with a post by their then ex-boyfriend.

Details from the post were quickly spun into a conspiracy. Based on the lone fact of Quinn's relationship with one Kotaku writer, Nathan Grayson, who quoted [them] once in an article and never covered or reviewed [their] game, rumors circulated that Quinn had "alleged affairs with video game journalists" which influenced coverage of [their] game. There is no evidence to support this assertion, and the only fact that it's based on—that Quinn began a relationship with Grayson sometime after he quoted [them] in an article and never published anything about [them] again—disproves it. (Johnston 2014 a)

A colleague of Quinn's stood to their defense. The next weekend, he told prominent video games news publisher Polygon that "his Twitter and Dropbox accounts [were] hacked and e-mail accounts, passwords, and banking information [were] published in response to his defense." He then quickly announced his departure of the video game development industry. (Johnston 2014 b) At the time, Anita Sarkeesian was known for publishing videos analyzing video game tropes with a feminist lenses on a YouTube channel called Feminist Frequency. Because she was a woman who publicly spoke about sexism within video games, when people began attacking Quinn over this alleged ethical scandal, Sarkeesian was quickly dragged in. Eleven days after the original blog post was published, Sarkeesian shared screenshots of a Twitter user who tweeted at Sarkeesian her own address by saying he'll "rape you to death. After I'm done, I'll ram a tire iron up your cunt" and that he'll "drink your blood out of your cunt after I rip it open." (Feminist Frequency 2014) Casey Johnston clarifies in an article about Gamergate – the Internet-deigned name of this harassment campaign – that "gamer" in this context is not a person who plays video games. The "gamers" of Gamergate is the historic demographic for the home video game market, which skews "young and male" and can perhaps be better understood today as "hard-core video game fans." (Johnston 2014 b) To these gamers, Sarkeesian and Quinn came to represent a community of people that loudly and at inopportune times would advocate for just and equal social politics. Nieborg and

Foxman explain that “Gamergate can be seen as “the beginning of the end” of an era in the history of digital games.” (2018, 113) Much of the video game’s industry – from its development to marketing, to the game genres, practices, and discourses – has been influenced by its “dominant masculine identity,” and that it was only recent to 2013 that “mainstream journalists, critics, and large segments of the industry have become more vocal and successful in championing for greater diversity.” (Nieborg and Foxman 2018, 112) To the gamers of Gamergate, these people came to be known as SJWs. SJW is an acronym for social justice warrior. “It is important to note that the abbreviation SJW is used much more frequently than the entire phrase,” Massanari and Chess (2018, 528) explain. The initial reason is that it takes less characters to type, which is “an important consideration on Twitter where much of the original #Gamergate organizing took place.” (528) They describe that the term SJW “conveys a pejorative perspective toward progressive politics and social justice.” (526) “The real cause” of Gamergate, Sarkeesian reflects for Polygon years later, “was a silencing and shutting out of women, people of color, trans people, and other marginalized folks who had started making their voices heard in gaming culture.” (Sarkeesian 2019) By September 9, 2014, there was screen captured proof of 4chan users plotting the twists and turns that Gamergate took in the previous three-week span; proving the fact this was a controversy bred by users (individuals) who were spiteful against a select group of people, who consciously chose to weaponize their hate into digital abuse. (Johnston 2014 a) Seeing Quinn go into hiding for their safety, seeing a lack of response from video game publishers or developers like Electronic Arts or Treyarch (the developers of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*), seemed to impart to incels and channers their methods were working. Their

enemies were leaving the public eye, to turn away from the doxxing and lexical abuse hurled their way, which meant their tactical enemy was retreating.

Gamergate was a foundational moment to these communities. (Ferrell et al. 2019, 88; Massanari and Chess 2018) People on the website pat themselves on the back for the good work they had done over the next year, if some do not continue their Internet-mediated attacks. Both video game beat journalists and some legacy reporters with piqued interest continue reporting on Gamergate. Having seen this vitriol play out in the quasi-public, journalists begin sincerely engaging with “game culture’s underlying tensions.” (Nieborg and Foxman 2018, 126) Seeing later results of Internet-mediated misogyny allowed reporters to connect Gamergate to wider online misogyny and see this period as an inciting event. (Nieborg and Foxman 2018)

The next summer, journalist Aaron Sankin explains for *Feels Good Man*, skeptical channers sat alongside everyone else to watch Donald Trump announce his presidential campaign. Unlike most others whose skepticism was also answered with this announcement, /pol/ quickly grew to like what they heard from him. Within hours of his announcement, channers were creating Pepe memes with Trump’s hair. (Jones 2020, 40:37-41:02) According to Matt Braynard, former Director of Strategy and Data for the Donald Trump presidential campaign, users on 4chan grass-rooted a mobilization strategy. They created memes, using /r/The_Donald as an incubation hub before spreading them out into the wider Internet, to attempt to persuade normies into supporting Trump. “The inside terminology for this was The Great Meme War.” (Jones 2020, 42:02) Mid-October 2015 Trump retweeted an alteration of himself as Pepe standing in front of an American flag. To most voters, it is just weird that Trump shared a picture of himself but green on his official Twitter. “But” says Braynard. “If you were

part of the community who had been spending years and years and years using Pepe, suddenly a little antenna goes up, you pick up a signal, and say “Wow. Maybe this guy’s right for us.”” (43:19) Within the campaigning stage of Trump’s presidency, 4chan established itself as a secret and necessary base to his zeitgeist and they were recognized and covertly applauded as such by the Trump campaign.

Seeing something, even a meme, repeated enough times will alter a person’s perception about it. Journalists saw the behavior expressed during Gamergate, then later symbolized the event with “the greater issue of persistent online harassment.” (Nieborg and Foxman 2018, 124) Fake news memes are antagonistic against established media networks like CNN to the point to manipulation. Repeated exposure enough times can lead one to believe legacy news network do not sincerely care about their factual integrity. (Smith 2019) Seeing memes portraying SJWs as non-normative peoples who cannot relax long enough to engage in civil conversation can lead one to identify SJWs with those characteristics. (Massanari and Chess 2018) Similarly to all this, swimming in an ironic antisemitic soup for long enough will have the irony melt away like fat, leaving only sincere extremism in its wake. Dale Beran remarks how at the time, the Nazification of Pepe the Frog was not more than “just the most offensive thing you could do. But now it reads as a weird prologue to when the irony melted away.” (Jones 2020, 34:15) By the time Donald Trump becomes the 45th president, channers and incels find themselves arm-and-arm with new company, alongside sincere white nationalists. This is how we have created a subculture with a “politics of negation:” channers and incels who disdain the rise of feminism because of their perceived loss of the few existing benefits of manhood, and white nationalists who disdain the rise of multiculturalism because of a perceived tarnish of a great national (western,

Anglophone) identity. (Ganesh 2018, 35) This is the point when David Duke cheerfully says that Donald Trump winning proves to Duke that he is winning. (Mascaro 2016)

An interactive map by the Southern Poverty Law Center displays how starting around 2014 hate groups move away from in the heart of the Confederacy to further across the Eastern United States. (“Hate Map” 2020) The Anti-Defamation League reports that 63% of American Jews have personally experienced or seen some form of antisemitism since 2016. (“2021 Survey on Jewish Americans’ Experiences” 2021) Assisting directors for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in the Counterterrorism and Criminal Investigation divisions, spoke for the House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Liberties about the rise of domestic, ideologically driven American terrorists. (“Confronting White Supremacy” 2019) Christopher Wray, FBI Director as of 2017, has been public that “the greatest domestic threat to terrorism are white supremacists.” (Sherman 2020) White nationalist, guns rights, anti-government extremist groups like the Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, Three Percenters, and Oath Keepers, have formed since the early Obama years but have since been galvanized into new breath and ferocity with Trump’s implicit (and explicit) approval. (Coaston 2018; Hesson and Cooke 2020; “Jury convicted man” 2019; McCoy 2014; Zadrozny 2020) Trump’s political base proves itself to be young, meme-making males who increasingly seem to skirt the line between ‘joking’ and ‘plotting presidential assassination.’ (Bella 2020)

We have established that incels and channers equally feel slighted because of their perceived change in social strata; that because feminism misguided women into hypersexuality based on vapid qualifications, these men are left without significant partners who value them as complex humans. White nationalists resent “the entire “liberal” or “leftist” project that seeks the equality of people of different ethnicities and

cultures.” (Ganesh 2018, 35) What happens when these men with an inflated sense of entitlement wake up on November 10th to find their president has lost the general election? They begin plotting a counterattack against their political enemies. They would meet in their public forums – now removed from Reddit, four years after its primary use had well and passed (Newton 2020) – to lay “out detailed plans to commit murder and overthrow the government,” where people could (and did) screen capture these plans. (Doctorow 2021) Trump’s political base (now an embodied crowd of channers, incels, and white nationalists) came out to Washington DC on January 6th, 2021, as Congress voted to verify Joseph Biden’s presidential victory. As Representative McConnell warned that voiding Biden’s victory would “push democracy into a death spiral”, the well-armed crowd overpowered DC police and breached the Capitol steps. Approximately 40 minutes later, these men entered the building and now began hunting for politicians. By 6pm, the District of Columbia is under curfew, whereby the next morning 69 people are arrested on unlawful entry and/or breach of curfew charges. (Tan, Shin, and Rindler 2021) Wray admitted to the Senate Judiciary Committee that, though the FBI does not have an exact number of people at the January 6th riot who are, what is internally called “militia violent extremis[ts], the number keeps growing as we build out our investigations.” He then clarified for Senator Leahy:

I would certainly say, as I think I’ve said consistently in the past, that racially motivated violent extremism, specifically of the sort that advocates for the superiority of the white race, is a persistent, evolving threat. It’s the biggest chunk of our racially motivated violent extremism cases for sure. And racially motivated violent extremism is the biggest chunk of our domestic terrorism portfolio. (Bump 2021)

Tumblr

The community I am studying which held discourses on Tumblr can be more accurately described as a community of transformative fandom and those who perform transformative works around a media object. An example of this as verb is creating art portraying film characters you really enjoy, or writing original stories set in a fiction novel's universe. This contrasts to curative fandom, in where fans learn trivia revolving around their affective object (such as those who memorize a baseball player's batting average or which scenes of Lord of the Rings are filmed in what locations). Prior to 2007 most of transformative fandom online existed on or around LiveJournal.com, a blogging platform. An event called Strikethrough resulted in many blogs permanently losing entry posts, if not their entire blogs, and left those unaffected skittish and scared. In the decades prior to Strikethrough copyright owners held an adversarial relationship to transformative fan activities; the sense in the community was this was the latest "attack" of such and reminded users that their presence was permitted by the website holders but could just as easily be removed.

Initially, the threat against fandom existed because production company lawyers were protective of their brand and messaging, and authors and artists were protective of how people treated their media. They were concerned with how people "played in their sandbox", which is how transformative fandom understands their interactions with media objects. (thepioden 2016) Perhaps it was the rise of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that dissuaded independent authors to keep issuing cease and desist orders to individual websites; (rapacityinblue 2017) perhaps it was the creation of the Organization of Transformative Works and their legal counsel that implicitly persuaded production lawyers to relax their intellectual rights; (Jenkins 2012, [2.7]) perhaps it was the financial profits exhibitors were making at comic conventions. (The Devastator and

The Beat 2014) Regardless of how, media production companies came to realize fandom and these fan communities were a market to advertise to, and thus to communicate with at events like San Diego- or New York Comic Con. Companies like Marvel Studios would fly actors, directors, and/or writers out to these conventions to host Question & Answer panels for attendees (fans). The convention could later publish a recording of this panel onto a related YouTube channel, where it would be immortalized and allowed to spread to various pop culture publications. (SDCC 2013 - Marvel Studios Panel 2013)

Celebrities, who once were only accessible through MTV Network or via their publicity agency, had Instagram and Twitter accounts just like the average user (person).

It took several more years (at least three) after Strikethrough for fandom to revolve itself around the website Tumblr. (Winterwood 2018) This was thanks to various design reasons. Tumblr's structure meant it was a better visual archive than LiveJournal. The latter was primarily concerned with text blogging, while the former is amenable to creating text, photo, chat log, quotes, audio, or video posts, and publicly searchable hashtags – topic(s) referenced in a particular post. This is a feature on microblogging sites like Twitter and Tumblr, which allows for greater engagement – interaction – on posts. (Winterwood 2018, [4])

The week after 4chan “raided” Tumblr, on the weekend of July 11th, 2014, there was a Tumblr enthusiasts convention event in Chicago called Dashcon. If fandom as is currently existing on Twitter tried to organize a similar convention today (even fandom in 2017) the convention would crash and burn weeks after conception. Because an embodied fan event like this, one revolved around a website's community, had not been attempted before it was accepted and actively encouraged by Tumblr's community (userbase). “The atmosphere at the time was one of excitement and earnest,” says Sarah

Z, (2020, 6:10) a YouTube essayist with incredible knowledge of Tumblr's community and affect. She goes into great detail about how the convention fell apart on the weekend of the event; detailing several panel guests who walked out on the day of the convention; (29:46, 34:18, 34:41) how the organizers had to solicit attendees for \$17,000; (21:26) and that volunteers and staff were not compensated for their lodging or labor. (15:49, 23:48) Before long, the story of DashCon had left Tumblr and entered the larger digital ecosystem: immortalized into the tale of a convention where "the organizers recruited a bunch of unpaid teenagers with no experience to run things on the ground, and the only people it was worse for than the attendees were the panelists." (Z. 2020, 36:53)

Tumblr.com, the website domain, was purchased by Yahoo in August 2013 for a rumored \$1.1 billion valuation. To quote Allegra Rosenberg (2020),

Three years later, Yahoo itself was bought by Verizon, and these two acquisitions in quick succession induced a general mood of uncertainty amongst users. What sort of meddling could Tumblr be subject to, under the purview of corporate overlords who didn't really seem to know what to do with their ugly-duckling asset?

Why would Yahoo purchase a website domain for more than a billion dollars? What business decisions were calculated in the executive board room? Yahoo wanted a pre-existed fanbase to present advertising to. To quote a common web developer saying, if you are not paying for the product, you are the product (Orlowski 2020, 13:24). In purchasing a website with a large network of users and high unique monthly engagement, presenting ads to this space would simply net in advertising profit. This is similar to Twitter's current model: presenting "tweets" near-identical in form to native posts (Tweets from those you follow) on a user's timeline to advertise that product to Twitter's userbase. There is a nascent field to coaching brands to effective ad utilization on Tumblr. (Mialki 2019)

The Tumblr userbase adjusts. Some users are disincentivized from the website after the ownership changes, new users enroll on the site as fandoms grow in quantity and quality.

[In 2018,] A complex combination of factors—including the passing of the federal SESTA-FOSTA law to ostensibly combat sex trafficking, and issues with Apple’s App Store and its provisions against apps containing adult content—led to Tumblr enacting a ban on NSFW [not safe for work] content across the platform. A major uproar ensued, and Tumblr’s long-standing communities devoted to both real-life and illustrative pornography spoke out against the restrictions. [...] *Business Insider* reported in late 2019 that Tumblr’s unique monthly visitors had decreased by more than 20% in the year since the porn ban. (Rosenberg, 2020)

Twitter already had a well-thriving userbase before 2018; network television advertisers were wising up to that affective digital network as early as 2012. (Keidra 2012) The events of Gamergate and Dashcon in 2014, two years of active Donald Trump presidency, and most users changing their vehicles of communication from one to another (going from visiting one primary website to visiting a different primary website) had significantly changed Tumblr’s demographic from what it was the eight years prior.

There are several reasons why fandom has changed in the years since Strikethrough. One of the major ones is the platform that fandoms communicate on; similar to the way that a woman inhabiting a sexualized avatar can internalize that she is responsible for her own sexual assault. (Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase 2013, 935) I aim to discuss the platform’s participation in this psychological change at a later section of this paper. For now, I also believe that Tumblr’s early experience with 4chan and the userbase’s later migration to other microblogging platforms changed the way younger fans relate to and interact with media and its creator(s). Fan enthusiasm is an accepted phenomena in popular culture and as an object of academic study (Dean 2017, 7; Jane 2014; Sandvoss 2013), and I believe it is worth understanding how the fan/creator

dynamic has shifted inside a digital medium. Emma Jane shares a concern that antifans – people who dislike a fan object yet engage with it “precisely to raise their blood pressure” – can now direct their “e-bile” to ordinary people who “are more psychologically, physically and financially vulnerable to antifan campaigns than seasoned celebrities.” (Jane 2014, 184) I wish to example this dynamic shift and projected e-bile at ordinary citizens by discussing a transgender YouTube creator who was attacked by her own transgender fan base.

Natalie Wynn is an American YouTuber who began producing videos under the channel ContraPoints in 2016. “I noticed a surge of political content around GamerGate in 2014, and it was pretty right-wing – or at least anti-progressive’,” she told interviewer Jake Hall in 2019, “citing a spectrum of content ranging from the centrist to the straight-up Neo-Nazi. She decided to create her own videos, deconstructing social justice issues through a left-wing lens” (Hall 2019) after becoming disillusioned by her attempt at a PhD in philosophy at Northwestern University. In the same way that website users can concurrently engage with different website communities, Wynn’s fanbase was targeted to centrists and those headed towards the alt-right, with left-wing viewers concurrently existing. It was her left-wing audience that gave her ““credible kickback” in the past, “for having any interaction with somebody who is publicly right-wing.”” (Hall 2019) It was her left-wing fanbase that gave her kickback after publishing a Socratic dialogue video about gender expression, one devoid of her intent or position. “People didn’t like the ambiguity [in that video], so in the absence of me giving my opinion, they felt they had the right to speculate and assume the worst.” (Hall 2019) It was her left-wing fanbase that spoke out against her 10-second cameo use of transgender activist Buck Angel, culminating in a so-called accountability campaign

fixated on facts completely irrelevant to the argument made in her video. This campaign lasted a month and resulted in her and her colleagues' financial loss. Wynn formed her brand in the bullseye of "4chan, Nazis, stalkers, and TERF" harassment campaigns. Yet "in a way, leftist Twitter finally accomplished what [they] have been trying and failing to do to me for years. They've made Twitter into a platform so hostile to my existence that I've decided to leave it forever." (1:25:20) In her own words:

[The hundreds and hundreds of tweets of harassment], let me remind you, is over a 10-second voice over clip in a 48-minute video about a completely unrelated topic. How do you work, how do you create, when a decision so trivial can become the main event for weeks of your life? And the tweets are just the beginning. After that, there's the Reddit threads and the YouTube comments and the Facebook discourse and the Medium posts and the Newsweek article. Opulence is a video me and [my assistant director] spent hundreds of hours carefully piecing together. I think it's my best video. And to have the response to it completely overwhelmed by one minor casting decision is heartbreaking and infuriating to me. (1:04:26)

In the video I am citing, Wynn admits "I feel like I cannot continue this channel until" she addressed her situation. (Wynn 2019, 22:23) 18 months later one of Wynn's colleagues, Lindsay Ellis, a YouTube video producer with thirteen years' experience publishing media criticism online, received massive fan backlash after a misinterpretation of her Tweet comparing *Raya and The Last Dragon* to *Avatar: The Last Airbender* had blown up to accuse this tone-deafness as xenophobia which contributes to the recently occurred Atlanta spa shootings. (Ellis 2021, 15:17)

Wynn structured her video (what I am citing) by outlining tropes to cancel culture; tropes I will recite here. She adds additional themes in late March and April 2021 after Ellis' canceling. She explains her initial tropes in the context of James Charles and his falling-out with "extremely close friend" Tati Westbrook with what information was publicly accessible as of December 2019. (O'Conner and Haylock 2021) I am

describing this phenomenon of left-wing mob harassment, so-called “cancel culture” (Ferré-Sadurní and McKinley 2021), in greater detail because I wish to expand on some relevant points later in this paper. I am also describing cancel culture in detail because I think some tropes can link to the concept of antifandom rather well. (Jane 2014) Wynn describes canceling as “a form of vigilante mob justice” (Wynn 2019, 6:22), and lists seven tropes to cancel culture:

- The presumption of guilt, as opposed to the American legal presumption of innocence. Wynn says this originates from the progressive norm ‘believe victims’, “because out in the world at large, people generally *don’t* believe victims. But I think it’s pretty obvious how “believe victims” is a norm that’s easy to abuse.” (6:26)
- Abstraction, which “replaces the specific concrete details of a claim with a more generic statement. In the transition [to an] abstracted claim, we’ve lost not only the sense of this being an unverified accusation, but we’ve also lost all specific details.” (7:24) She explains seeing Twitter discourse revolving around Charles go from accusation to presumed fact, then seeing the presumed fact that “James Charles tried to trick straight men” generalized into “James Charles is toxic and manipulative.” (7:37)
- Essentialism. “When we go from criticizing a person’s actions to criticizing the person themselves. We’re not just saying they did bad things; we’re saying they’re a bad person.” (9:40) Wynn describes seeing Twitter discourse morph from “James Charles tried to trick straight men” to “James Charles is a sexual predator.” (9:03) “Here, we’re targeting James himself,” she teaches her YouTube viewers, “not just his actions, but the type of person he is.” (9:58)

- Pseudo-moralism/Pseudo-intellectualism. Wynn tells the viewer of her hunch that “this was not a case of triggered SJWs”, or rather she believes that the fans who decried Charles and his actions were “not sincerely outraged and hurt by their sincere belief that [he] was a sexual predator.” (11:16) Instead, she believes Westbrook had felt,

betrayed [by] this millionaire kid who she supported and helped [and that accusing him] was just a twist of the knife. But moralism or intellectualism provide a phony pretext for the callout. You can pretend you just want an apology; you can pretend you’re just a concerned citizen who wants the person to improve. (12:11)

- No forgiveness. I would prefer to define this trope that no matter what someone may later say or do to the contrary, once a person has been canceled for a given action or situation, this will be used as evidence of their later misdeeds. Wynn describes Twitter users “referencing earlier James Charles scandals” during her studying this topic. (14:03) The scandals quoted were situations which Charles had publicly apologized for prior to December 2019. (16:46; 18:41) These users still referenced these scandals as if they had never been addressed by him.
- The transitive property of cancelation. Wynn caveats in her video editing that “maybe transitive is not the right word” (24:14) but I find it correct that canceling has a transitive relationship. “Cancelation is infection. If you associate with a canceled person, the cancelation rubs off.” (24:11) Wynn is canceled for collaborating with Buck Angel, someone who “a lot of trans people think is a horrible person.” Because Wynn collaborated with Angel on an artistic project, “[it] is evidence that I too am a horrible person.” (23:55) Lindsay Ellis was canceled a year and a half after Wynn, and Ellis admits she “started getting

noticeable harassment from the purity tester brigade [after] I stood up for a trans woman on Twitter.” (Ellis 2021, 1:29:35) This trope can also be understood as guilt by association.

- Dualism. I prefer to define this trope as an us vs. them mentality. Wynn shows the video viewer a selection of tweets harassing her; saying she “could do with a fully wound backhand to the mouth”; (Wynn 2019, 58:16) that if Wynn “refuses to accept she has an apology to make, it will become our responsibility to work on deplatforming her”; (59:30) or claiming that “pretty much everyone who supports Wynn hates” nonbinary people but if you were “blindsided by this somehow, so long as you now know that ContraPoints [has been deemed bad], you’re safe and cool.” (59:00) These are performative statements which tells other users that to maintain membership in the transgender Twitter community is to perform violent disdain against Wynn.

After Ellis’ brush of the cancel mob, Wynn amended an additional two themes to cancel culture:

- Crucifixion. I describe this trope as a scorched earth policy. Wynn added this trope after Ellis deleted her Twitter account and saw Twitter users cheer as if the Allied powers had just won world war victory. “BULLYING WORKS KIDS!!! ONE BITCH DOWN, ONE TO GO!”, one Twitter user cheers before directly targeting a mutual colleague with “JENNY YOU’RE NEXT, YOUR DAYS ARE FUCKING NUMBERED.” Wynn describes this trope as “freeform resentment and vindictive rage, fixing on a target to bully, not to make the world more just, but to regain a lost sense of power by treading someone down.” (Wynn 2021 a)

- Encyclopedia Problematica. An aesthetic portmanteau of Encyclopedia Dramatica, a “far right 4chan supplement that publishes humilitainment articles, revenge porn, etc alongside alleged moral crimes”, with your fave is problematic, a “Tumblr blog posting compendia of public figures’ lifetime social justice crimes & misdemeanors,” this trope is called such because they are both digital sites that “anthologiz[es] a person’s entire history of misdeeds & embarrassments, and weaponize[es] it to harass them.” (Wynn 2021 b) Wynn’s experience of Encyclopedia Problematica is “a collage of problematic tweets” being constantly brandished against her as if evidence to her secret, internal transphobia. (Wynn 2019, 40:39) This problematic Tweet collage is also the evidence that was used against Buck Angel. (37:34)

Web Design

People are informed by their surroundings. Tools are formed for human hands, because if they were not then we (humans) would have no use for them. This is my foundation when I focus on web design and the website experience for the user, the person who is interacting with the website's interface. What decisions need to be made to encourage online shopping is an example of user experience (UX) design. (Bleier, Harmeling, & Palmatier 2019) UX design is a whole field of study in its own right that, to my understanding, was introduced with the book *The Design of Everyday Things* by Donald Norman in 1988. I will not be discussing UX design within the field's lens, however. Someone without years of academic training can still understand the same principles as someone with that training even without the lexical knowledge or of the mechanics behind that principle. Similarly, my sources talk about web design and a user's experience primarily from that user's experience. My few interjections are couched in my experience as a website user of over fifteen years. What experienced voices are included are sources from the documentary *The Social Dilemma*.

A major difference between websites of thirty years ago and today is how websites try to position their relationship with their audience (users). Platforms and websites today try to cut their teeth by positioning themselves as the primary player in their chosen field. Websites that attempted this in the late 1990s most likely suffered in 2001 when the dot-com bubble burst. The Internet ecosystem was in its natal stages, and whatever websites did not boom and bust had invested their venture capital infusion to build infrastructure, like servers and huge-scale backend support, to create a hardware spine that could support gigabits and gigabits of internet throughput usage. (Hanne and Kennard 2015) Whatever websites survived the dot-com bubble took a hibernation

period of sorts before reemerging at larger scale near the turn of the 2010s. Amazon's survival strategy for five years was to slowly build its catalog of third-party vendors; they later included out-leasing their server network space to other websites as part of their survival strategy. (Lee 2017) Steam is a personal computer (PC) video games sales marketplace developed by Valve in October 2003. This marketplace is accessible by website domain or their independent client application, meaning Steam can be run independently from web clients like Google Chrome. Users enroll with an account and can choose to pair a credit card to ease sales transactions. Steam has over one billion user accounts as of April 28, 2019, and over 30,000 games uploaded by video game developers to their public library. A given user has an average 55 games bought and collected in their private Steam library. (Zuckerman 2020). Steam is not the only PC video game sales platform, there are smaller marketplaces such as itch.io and the Humble Store and rising competitors like the Epic marketplace, but these players have yet to rise to Steam's level. "For a long time, as a PC game developer, Steam was the only place to go. You couldn't go against [Valve] and it was in their benefit to hardline [a sales cut] conversation because Valve has so many players on Steam," said Joost van Dreunen, a game industry analyst specializing in digital distribution who co-founded Nielsen-owned analytics firm SuperData Research. (Stratt 2019)

Another concern that websites in 1991 and 2021 share is the struggle to maintain server costs, that is to collect the monthly funding to keep a website active and running. Like how if a business skips on paying their building rent, they will lose access into that building, if a website does not pay their server cost to a website host, they will find that the website domain no longer returns the website's data. Many website owners host

advertisements on their site to maintain server costs, but typically just advertising is not enough to cover the full cost. Newspaper sites cover costs for their website (and increasingly their journalists' paychecks) by soliciting subscription services from users (readers). Wikipedia similarly relies on donations from readers to maintain their server costs. Artists who publish content (called creators) have increasingly used Patreon.com as an additional income stream, a website where users (presumably fans) can choose to arrange monthly payments to artists or creators (hence content creator). However, for sites like Twitter and YouTube, attempts at patronage have not gone well. Twitter has only just begun looking into revenue streams beyond advertising. (Hutchinson 2021) YouTube has a partnership program with selected, approved users, but to my first-hand experience it is not nearly as ubiquitous or commonly accepted as Twitch.com's partner or affiliate programs. By 'commonly accepted', I mean less users engage² with YouTube's partner program than with Twitch's partner or affiliate program. Andrejevic (2011) notes that actors like Google or Facebook are privately-owned. Platforms have incentive to monitor user activity to generate "inactive payment". (286)

In the case of Twitter, the site had stabilized at 330 million monthly active users until the company switched to a new measurement metric of monetizable daily active users. (Tankovska 2021 a) This figure has grown from 109 million mDAUs in Q1 2017, to 199 million users in Q1 2021. (Tankovska 2021 b) While Twitter is earning more money from more users each day, this does not necessarily mean more users are enrolling with the website. "When a site hits its peak in terms of total active accounts, there is still capitalist pressure to increase value and profit. A shrinking pool of eyes, plus a need to

² 'Engage' here means enrolling a monthly subscription or paying individual donations.

increase revenue, equals a service that needs to squeeze more blood from the same stone.” (Ellis 2021, 11:45) This is why Twitter implemented the design change to show a user tweets that friends have liked – rather than chose to share –, and why it created the function to address a Tweet without directly communicating with the original poster (OP): “to keep the [existing users] from logging off.” Twitter wants users “to post and to boost and to engage, so it will put as few barriers between the user and the engagement action as possible.” (Ellis 2021, 12:15) To Twitter, it does not matter whether the engagement is the user is performing is a signal boost (sharing information to spread it out to further users) or a harassment campaign; it does not matter whether the notification that returns you to the app is telling you a friend liked your observation or if it is a stranger telling you to drink bleach. It does not matter if the content on your timeline is stunning art hand-drawn by a friend, or a news article recounting in morbid detail the death of the Earth. The fact a user engaged with Twitter’s platform counts as monetizable engagement, which communicates to Twitter’s programmers and executives that their alterations are working. Social media sites utilize (secretly collected) user behavior to “teach” their algorithms to create more accurate predictions of what their users will do. (Andrejevic 2011, 281) Therefore, social media companies have great incentive to collect user data: “to manage risks before they emerge or become serious while at the same time maximizing sales.” (281) Because these are tools which the website independently created, the websites can claim their user data as technical assets for their growth. “It is the private ownership and control over information infrastructures that provides both the incentive and the ability to capture this information.” (Andrejevic 2011, 285)

I, in goodwill, am sure Twitter's developers were disappointed when they ran the simulations and found that trying to remove Nazis from their platform would also sweep Republican lawmakers off the website. (Cox and Koebler 2019) Equally, I am sure Facebook's developers were horrified when they learned the gravity of hate against Rohigyas that was hosted on Facebook; enough gravity to call for a UN Human Rights investigation. (Orlowski 2020 1:07:04; Stecklow 2018) Former Operations Manager for Facebook Sandy Parakilas all but confirms this when he explains how the complex algorithms, which for example can tag user's posts as violating Facebook's policy, are so sophisticated that even the "few people who understand how those systems work don't necessarily fully understand what's gonna happen with a particular piece of content." (Orlowski 2020, 48:39) Aza Raskin, creator of the infinite scroll function and former employee for Firefox & Mozilla labs, described how a website's algorithm can "tilt the floor of human behavior. [It makes] some behavior harder and some easier." (1:02:27) Renèe Diresta, Research Manager for the Stanford Internet Observatory and former Head of Policy for Data for Democracy, gives an example of this tilted floor:

[Pizzagate was a conspiracy that began] with the idea that ordering a pizza meant ordering a trafficked person. As the groups got bigger on Facebook, Facebook's recommendation engine started suggesting to regular users that they join Pizzagate groups. So, if a user was, for example, anti-vaccine or believed in chemtrails or had indicated to Facebook's algorithm in some way that they were prone to belief in conspiracy theories, Facebook's recommendation engine would serve them Pizzagate groups. Eventually, this culminated in a man showing up with a gun, deciding he was going to liberate the children from the basement of a pizza place that did not have a basement. This is an example of a conspiracy theory that was propagated across all social networks. The social network's own recommendation engine is voluntarily serving this up to people who had never searched for the term "Pizzagate" in their life. (Orlowski 2020, 1:01:01)

The reason so many developers spoke publicly for the documentary is not the inherent risk of algorithms against the average human psyche. It is that unchecked technology (a

heavy contributing factor to the hyper partisan political society found in our modern (Western, colonizing) states is able to burrow into the addictive centers of our brains, out of the human need to seek community. Website algorithms exacerbate existing attitudes from users (people) to incentivize their further use, as explained by Diresta. Unscrupulous actors can pay their way into this burrowed hole and manipulate hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of people to have such particular opinion. The last third of *The Social Dilemma* covers the rise of radicalization, and the poisoned well that has become social media networks due to these algorithmic issues. (Orlowski 2020; Smith 2019)

As opposed to the web developer's perspective, I am sure fandom had not considered that the platform they communicated on was a significant decision. Fandom, as stated earlier, was hosted on LiveJournal until a user bleed starting in 2007. It was also a popular fandom practice to enroll in an analog or electronic mailing list to plug into fandom activity around, say, *Xena: Princess Warrior*. In these formats it is relatively easy to follow along to a conversation. In the mail list example, a general update is sent out to all, and individual questions or comments can be sent to relevant parties, optionally attaching other people who may be interested in the conversation that could occur. Not everyone who is included in the initial update are included in later discussions. Modern forums exist in this format, for the most part; the difference being is that on a forum you are privy to additional posts made on a thread (the original update). Sites like LiveJournal structure such that there is an initial post, and subsequent comments and conversations are nested further within themselves underneath the original post (OP). This format exists today on Reddit. This is also how additional comments appeared on Tumblr until September 2015. (Bell 2015) Beginning

after that layout update, added comments (reblogs) constituted their own section only directly tied back to the previously attributed reblog. This creates a spider-web like relationship with the OP and later comments, where two people can have wholly different relationships with an observation because of later, additional reblogs. (nyxelestia 2020; Winterwood 2017, [18])

Twitter is incentivized to keep existing users on the platform for longer and longer, to increase their ad revenue. I believe these incongruous conversations on Twitter facilitates users to stay on the platform for longer. By ensuring that all further conversation to an initial Tweet (OP) can only be easily navigable by that original account, it trains users who wish to see the branches of discourse to actively navigate that disorganized material, and thus communicate (argue) with others whom you probably do not know. Users must “resort to either passive consumption because that’s the only way to stay sane in such an overwhelming platform, or to extremism because that’s the only form of agency they can truly have in their experience.” When material (content) can only flow in one direction – from the OP to the user (fan) then further out to the user’s followers – and users either cannot or do not blacklist certain content they share or if that content were improperly tagged,

then the only solution is to control who is making that content and what is being made in the first place. [] If you are lucky, the people you follow and tags you engage with will line up with what you want to receive, and you won’t have a problem. If you are not lucky, then not only is [it] difficult (if not impossible) to avoid content you dislike, but because everyone has a very slightly different “view” of the [website platform] than everyone else, there will be people who straight up do not believe you if you say, “Even when I tried to avoid these things, I couldn’t.” (nyxelestia 2020)

This quoted Tumblr user empathizes with Tumblr extremists because of this quagmire, and how this would be mitigated – if not gone – if a user had great moderation over what was seen on their personal platform. However, I wonder how much good website moderation can do for a psyche fixated on purifying or persecuting transgressors.

Gender and Sexuality

When I was collecting academic and cultural sources for this topic, I sought relationalities beyond that from gender. It's a popular perception that those who participate in digital hate culture are white men from North America or Europe, (Ganesh 2018, 32) and those online who advocate for the advancement of social justice are seen as hypocritical women or queer people who cannot hold an emotionally level conversation. (Massanari and Chess 2018, 533) I sought further details and information of these communities beyond these perceptions, and the more I learned and researched about these people and their digital histories, the more I had to circle back to the gender dynamics in play. I tried to avoid this because I have participated in both these websites and communities, as a teenager and an adult. I also generally find that categorizing people in stratified boxes does not always foster true understanding. I had wished to examine and describe these communities without resorting to gender dynamics, what I viewed as an ancillary facet. Researching further, I find the gender dynamics in play to be integral to these communities, at the very least integral to personifying these people. Communicating online and discussing these online communities can breed a misinterpretation that these discursive figures are strawmen or speaking hyperbolically. At times this can certainly be the case, and it is correct that savvy users can effectively double speak to "appear" to be of a different community. (Johnston 2014 a) However, I do not believe it would be academically honest to intentionally ignore a major component of both the online alt-right and online fandom communities. A significant percentage of my sources either directly or indirectly reference gender and/or sexuality, whether it be the sexual violence expressed on incel subreddits (Farrell et al 2019), the explicit heterosexual failure of /mlp/ users on 4chan (Bailey and Harvey 2019, 336), or the explicitly queer and female targets of Gamergate. (Nieborg and Foxman 2018;

Sarkeesian 2019) Incels and those of like mind have built a communal identity around their romantic and sexual failures. (Bailey and Harvey 2019; Farrell et al, 2019; Ganesh 2018; Romano 2018; Wynn 2018) Even if over 90% of channers are Anonymous, (Bernstein et al 2011) it is an Internet culture truism that the perceived majority of 4chan users are English-speaking, heterosexual men. (Bailey and Harvey 2019; Hine et al 2017; Jones 2020) Transformative fandom has always been a space friendly to queer people. (Jenkins 2012, [2.5]) There have been recent efforts to quantify fandom demographics. A 2010 study on new users of the major fanfiction site FanFiction.net analyses those who deigned to display their nation of residence, age, and gender on their profile page. The survey found that 57% of users were US-based, that 80% are likely to be between 13 and 17 years of age, and that 78% of all new users self-defined as women or female. The author explains that only 10% of surveyed users displayed their gender on their profiles, but that nonetheless his finding has only a 1.1% margin of error. (Sendlor 2011) Tumblr user centrumlumina performed a website census of just over 10,000 respondents: 5,376 people self-identified as LGBTQ+. There were 300 more respondents who identified as 'genderqueer' rather than as 'man'. (centrumlumina 2013) Recent years have also revealed a lot of neurodivergent, queer women. (Discourse Demographics Survey 2017) Lily Winterwood hypothesized that the "porous boundary between [media-specific content] blogs and [individual] users mean that fandom and nonfandom parts of a site can easily find each other to exchange ideas, information, and lexical items." (2018, [4]) I hypothesize this is how fandom learned about academic queer theory on sites like Tumblr and Twitter in the beginning of the 2010s. I feel comfortable sharing this hypothesis after Winterwood's hypothesis was shown correct. (Winterwood 2018, [12]) Users on Tumblr and Twitter are provenly exposed to critical

and/or academic theory, lending to a “youth political subculture” (Nagel 2017, 69) of women and to-be queer people who had first cut their teeth on YouTube channels like Feminist Frequency in 2013.

Paranoia of the Other

As was very briefly touched on earlier, I once considered myself a member of both these communities. I continue to, to a far weaker extent. I was introduced to 4chan in 2007 and Tumblr in 2010; at the time I first heard about Tumblr, I would frequently visit /vp/, 4chan's Pokémon board. I can recall, one day on my Tumblr dashboard, seeing a signal boosted post warning other users to stay away from certain general tags, that 4chan had invaded these tags and were spamming such-and-such controversial material. I chuckled to myself when I saw this, and fondly recalled the days when I would intentionally say inflaming things in fandoms that I had no business being in. I can recall hearing the news of Elliot Roger and feeling my blood boil when I learned the details, thinking about this manchild who couldn't look past his own ego to look a woman in the eye and see a fellow human being. I can recall seeing a Tumblr blog of a user claiming that a Venus Flytrap was their genuine self-identity and being sincerely unable to tell if this was a sockpuppeting troll or a very young person. There are, after all, people on the site who latch their identity onto fictional characters and very sincerely claim this emotional attachment to be integral to their identity as a sovereign human being. (Fictionkin n.d) I can recall laughing when I first heard of Pepe (a collection of over 1,200 rare Pepees on sale at eBay) and later feeling a disappointed, morbid understanding when I learned of his Nazification. Since I understood these people (I experienced a fraction of my adolescence with these fellow lonely meme-makers) I understood the knee-jerk reaction to want a 4chan-exclusive meme just for themselves, to not want a meme they liked "co-opted" by normies. I was disappointed that 4chan chose to veer into antisemitism (a facet of 4chan that has existed for as long

as I have ever seen) and genuine human atrocity to reclaim their chosen meme of affection.

I can recall when certain fandoms would gain the reputation for having vicious fans on Tumblr, users who would attack anyone who disagreed with their position on such-and-such social justice topic, or who would violently harass an artist for over a year to the point of attempted suicide. (reddit.com 2015) Having been inoculated to fandom sensibilities on LiveJournal circa 2008 this news confused me: why did some fans feel the need to bring themselves forward to forcibly remove an artist they did not like from a community which cannot be claimed by any one person? Why did some fans feel the need to personally tell an artist they didn't like that she should kill herself? I attribute part of this to the lowered boundary between the fan and the creator. (Winterwood 2017) When they communicated via mailing lists and GeoCities websites, fandom kept to the pop culture underground for decades out of (a warranted) litigious fear. (Jenkins 2012, [2.7]) *Supernatural* actor Misha Collins' relationship with fans of the show was a pickaxe that helped destroy the wall between a show's production staff and the viewers who watch weekly reliably. (domonicae et al. 2016) Being able to communicate with a showrunner on Twitter about your affect towards a show, however, simultaneously means being able to harass the showrunner when that affect turns sour.

I also think Tumblr's userbase was highly informed by 4chan's raid in early July 2014. 4chan introduced to Tumblr the idea that people online would intentionally lie about who they said they were. I believe this is what had subconsciously encouraged users to publish lists of their social persecutions (weight, age, disability, mental health, etc) to adequately present their "credentials" of authority about a given subject related to social justice. (randomslasher 2021) This sense of paranoia that your online

interlocuter could, in fact, not be who you assumed them to be is also a very common sense across 4chan. Though exact percentages vary across boards, less than 90% of channers choose to persistently identify themselves on their chosen board of affect. (Bernstein et al 2011, 55; Hine et al 2017, 5) Hine et al are able to quantitatively track /pol/'s raid attempts on YouTube by tracking the influx of comments after the link had been provided on the board. (2017, 10) With enough vitriol, with enough people, these raids become coordinated harassment campaigns. (Feminist Frequency 2014; Johnston 2014 a)

When you have participated in, been victim to, or witnessed a fair share of anonymous harassment campaigns against individual users or groups of users, it can become alarmingly easy to depersonify the massless voices. Gamergate and harassment against celebrities like Leslie Jones brought this anonymous vitriol to the mainstream. (Nieborg and Foxman 2018, 112) Existing online (even anonymously, even ironically) will have that experience eventually bleed out into your offline psyche, because the roles you inhabit can inform your psychology and opinions of yourself. (Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase 2013) This punctuates why incel violence is so worrying, not just to society and the greater (on- and offline) community, but because “the incel worldview is an anxious death spiral” which needs a therapeutic solution to rationalize out of. (Wynn 2018, 30:40)

Dan Olsen briefly mentions the Pizzagate conspiracy in his 2020 video *In Search of a Flat Earth*. It is brought up as a “co-morbid myth” (39:41) that lives with and parallel to a conspiracy theory known as QAnon. According to Olsen, Pizzagate exists as an iconographic conspiracy where “any visual depiction of pizza [was] subliminal code” that the company involved secretly has pedophilic sex dungeons in the building’s

basement. (Olsen 2020, 39:46) These alleged sex dungeons were created for, and thus are inextricably tied with, the QAnon conspiracy.

QAnon is a fascist Biblical esoteric apocalypse cult that believes an anonymous government agent known only as Q is leaking sensitive “above top secret” information to “Patriots” revealing that the political and cultural opponents of Donald J Trump (the so-called “Deep State” and “Hollywood elite”) are the minions of The Cabal, literal Satan-worshipping pedophiles who kidnap, traffic, molest, and terrorize children in order to produce and harvest their adrenochrome (a byproduct of the body processing adrenaline) which they use to get high during the ritual worship of their lord, who is, again, Satan; a constructed enemy so cartoonishly evil that it justifies discarding basically all human rights in order to turn opposition to Trump into a crime in a sweeping authoritarian purge of undesirables and political opponents called The Storm that will usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity, or The Great Awakening. (Olsen 2020, 37:56)

In case these claims do not sound incredulous in their own right, Q released his first “leak” in October 2017 on 4chan. (Kunzelman 2020) Before long, Q moved to 8chan to continue posting (what were called “drops” in-community). (Olsen 2020, 42:32) 8chan is distinct from 4chan initially in the fact that 8chan is no longer accessible on browsers like Chrome or Firefox, and secondly in that the former platform will gleefully host material deemed too reprehensible for the latter. Channers utilized 8chan during Gamergate to the extent that the domain became regarded their “indisputable home base.” (O’Neill 2014)

Olsen describes three men who were arrested after conducting heinous crimes after and because of their QAnon radicalization; that Slyman livestreamed a video of himself mid-police chase crying “QAnon please help me!”; (50:36) how Wright parked an armored van on the Hoover Dam for over an hour demanding a government document that allegedly contained lawsuit evidence; (52:10) and how Hurran:

[in the months prior] posted various QAnon and general conspiracy memes to his Instagram account, including a white rabbit meme with the description text, “Has anyone else been following Q and all the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole and

how this all relates to the Corona virus/COVID-19 situation? Lots of coincidences in all these Q posts if this turns out to be a nothing burger.” (Olsen 2020, 51:20)

This is not the only source of these events, nor are these men the only criminals in the name of Q. (Humphrey 2021; Mansell 2020; Slevin 2020; Sweeney 2020)

This radicalization effect is not exclusive to the political right-wing, I will point out. Being both a member of the queer community and a long-term user of Twitter.com, I am aware of (and agree with) the idea that the online left-wing radicalization effect is the TERF radicalization pipeline. TERF is an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminist. As Tumblr was seen as a “safe space” and home to queer teenage youth and girls, many informed by their childhood experiences of sexism, it was common for users to lament about their experiences and perform casual misandry on the site. A common joke was – and continues to be – “bisexual means I’m attracted to all women and two men.” (higgsboshark 2021) A bisexual user on TikTok shared that because she primarily is attracted to women, she is angry “that I’m dating a skinny white man and I love him and I’m happy, like what the fuck.” Tumblr user higgsboshark succinctly phrases it when they say that “flipping the scale” of Which Gender Is Bad does not advance gender equity, and later comments that this makes those who like men guilty for liking them and makes men feel “there is no other way to be.” (higgsboshark 2021) I find it interesting that this userbase seems to have communally forgotten that cultural sexism (patriarchy) places different expectations on men than women, and that is the reason why trans men receive less harassment for “passing” than trans women, rather than some biological truism. (canadianwheatpirates 2021) Andrea Long Chu theorizes that this group has historic sources from political lesbianism and the low but rough grating between political alignment and innate, personal desire. “The day we begin to

qualify [desire] by the righteousness of its political content is the day we begin to prescribe some desires and prohibit others. That way lies moralism only.” (Chu 2018) I believe the online TERF community is this personification, of queer women/sapphic-identified peoples who seek the political quantification of their desires. This could perhaps explain the odd union between feminist activists and the Alliance Defending Freedom in the United Kingdom, specifically against the Gender Recognition Act. (Provost and Archer 2018) I struggle to seek further sources swirling about in the realm of queer discourse to speak on this hypothesis, but I am positive that it is simply a dedicated day of research away.

Conclusion

There has been much critical study performed on the online right-wing and its ideological membership, from multimodal discourse analysis to quantified and plotted hate speech performed online. There exists a field of study that critically analyzes fandom and the powerful affect fandom necessarily engenders; what studies seek to tether fandom and political affect lament the lack of corroborating literature. Those discussed in this analysis are not the only victims to mass harassment campaigns. Off-hand, I think of James Gunn, Germaine Greer, or Laci Green as victims for having a vocal opinion that a larger community independently chose was wrong. (Burns 2017; Fleming 2018; Lewis 2015) When these sort of harassment events include strangers saying, “KISS YOUR PUSSY GOODBYE AS WE BREAK IT IRREPARABLY”, and ‘I’m going to pistol whip you over and over until you lose consciousness while your children ... watch and then burn ur flesh’,” (Jane 2014, 185) or baselessly call you an “atrocious human being” or “a biphobic, transphobic, racist” piece of shit mess (Ellis 2021, 1:18:38 and 1:24:14), receiving hundreds of these messages can encourage someone already on the mental brink to kill themselves. (Wynn 2019, 1:30:53) For those on the other side of that notification, typing out hate messages to send to strangers and doing this over years, (Nieborg and Foxman 2018) venting your frustrations with friends who roleplay as reported terrorists in their spare time, (Ludemann 2017) can lead these lonely, sexually frustrated men to vent their frustrations to the world via domestic terrorism. I know I am not the only individual to observe that both these groups are fixated on their gender subjugation. I also observe that these groups are both concerned with the effects of feminism in drastically different ways. The first group was concerned how normalized sexism can impart a young woman’s psyche, who later grew concerned about predatory men “invading” women’s spaces. The other group became embittered that women can

accuse someone with a lifetime of rejection and social isolation of rape, who then catastrophized into depression or rage from there. I do not imagine these later behaviors would be present if these people were embodied friends who could meet once a month at a mall. Part of this radicalization is thanks to the Internet websites hosting these discourses, encouraging users to continuously post (by exploiting an innate human want for connection) until eventually they seek those who agree with their opinions and perspectives. If a cruel actor is smart, they can infiltrate by enrolling a website account and learning the language of the community to learn how to effectively brand ideas that, on their face, are contrary to the community's position. I believe it is worth political scientists' time and knowledge to learn how these actions can happen, and the pros, cons, and effects of mobilizing a community base on the Internet.

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