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Abstract

Both horrifying and fascinating, 4chan.org is a wildly popular message board with a highly dedicated community of users. Compared to social media's increasing push to persistent identity online, 4chan maintains a culture of anonymity. Focusing on the ontological encounter spawned by the site, this paper argues that the interface embodies contingency and senses of alterity in several uniquely virtual ways. It concludes by articulating how this online mode of being holds promise beyond the often-repugnant content generated by the site.

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Introduction:

4chan.org is a site of multiple paradoxes. It uses a simple, seemingly outdated, message board design. Yet, its daily traffic is immense and its memes continue to spill over and multiply in broad popular culture. It is a discordant bricolage of humour, geek cultures, fierce debates, pornography, in-jokes, hyperbolic opinions and general offensiveness. However, this same haphazard stream of images and comments is the origin point for the highly active, organized and ever-changing group of Internet activists known as Anonymous. Given its contemporaneous tensions, it is little surprise that media outlets have labeled 4chan and Anonymous everything from "cyber-vigilantes"¹ who are "at once brilliant, ridiculous and alarming"² to the "lawless Wild West of the web, a place of uninhibited bawdiness and verbal violence"³.

In order to conceptualize and theorize the site, these contradictions should not be taken as problems that need to be solved. Instead, the instability should be foregrounded. Piecing together the site's content, interface, user base and moderation we get to the core of 4chan: an experience of contingency. This paper will turn to the philosophical traditions of ontology that deals with the nature of being. So rather than focusing solely on content, or asking ethnographic questions of how set groups of users 'are' using the site, it will ask how it is to experience or to

'be' on 4chan. In turn, the truly radical aspects of the stripped down Web site with an infinitely complex culture fall into view. Following a brief history of the site, this paper will locate the ontological experience of its unique interface and highlight a latchkey to the paradox of 4chan: contingency through anonymity.

Figure 1: 4chan's home page

History of 4chan:

Started in October 2003, 4chan.org is an English language, image-based, message board. Its design is straightforward: users post images and comments across 49 themed boards. There is no registration process or login required, meaning the vast majority of posts fall under the default username: Anonymous. Although people can use a cryptographically powered identity marker, or tripcode, they are rare⁴ and typically met with hostility. Tripcodes are also often imitated, meaning anonymity often overtakes the purported marked identity.

The user base has grown from a small community of site creator Christopher Poole's friends to a massive collective of nearly 18 million unique site visitors with over 730 million pages views a month (Tsotsis, 2011; Cha, 2010). Structurally, the various themed boards are dedicated to a variety of fandom cultures — like comic books, video games or Japanese animation — as well as broader interests — like photography, literature or fashion. However, nearly half of the 800,000 daily posts are on the /b/ or 'random' board, which, as the title suggests, has no fixed theme or structured content (Cha, 2010; Dibbell, 2010; Grigoriadis, 2011). The /b/ board stems from the original organization of the site: /a/ for animation and /b/ for everything else. It is now the notorious epicenter of 4chan, responsible for 30 percent of the sites total traffic and is frequently evoked negatively on the other

4chan boards (Bilton, 2010).

Figure 2: a thread on /co/ mocks tripcode users.

The derogatory specter which haunts /b/ stems from its habitually unpleasant discourse. There is minimal regulation of /b/, beyond the posting of personal information, images of child pornography and discussion of ‘raids’ on other Web sites. Even these nominal rules are regularly flouted. /b/’s enigmatic in-jokes, disparaging language, distressing gory images and unbound arguments are often matched with glimpses of astute political discussion, heartfelt moments of virtual friendship and sparkling banter. This dirt and ore of /b/ is — of course — present across all of 4chan’s boards, but discussions around a fixed topic, like fitness on /fit/ or Pokémon on /vp/, tend both to have a clearer focus and stricter rules about posting.

Describing the cultural impact and creative output of the site, Poole aptly labels 4chan a “meme factory”⁵. Though there is no shortage of examples of 4chan memes, perhaps the mostly widely known is LOLcats. The comical and purposely misspelled macro-text captions for feline images started on 4chan as the edgier Caturday. The meme spread quickly and is now the cornerstone of icanhascheezburger.com, a multi-million dollar business complete with a book series (Walker, 2010). A second example is rickrolling, in which deceptive links have directed millions of unsuspecting Internet users to videos of Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up” (Farquhar, 2010). The meme began as ‘duckrolling’, a bait-and-switch gif, and culminated in a surprise live performance of the song by Astley at the 2008 Macy Thanksgiving Parade.

Figure 3: several advice dog variations

A more recent viral meme is Advice Dog. Like most memes, it is simple: a dog’s head against a multi-colored rainbow background. Originating on a non-4chan message

board posting expressing reservations about kissing, 4chan users quickly turned the image into a dog that espouses terrible advice. This has led to a plethora of Advice Dog variations, such as a repugnant Bachelor Frog, a cringe-worthy Socially Awkward Penguin and an aggressive Courage Wolf. In an ongoing cycle, 4chan users adapt and reconfigure memes, then spread and distribute them across the Internet. Small gags morph into cultural punch lines and simple misspellings become new popular slang.

However, 4chan is not simply a benign site for collaborative creation. Earning the hyperbolic distinction in one Fox News exposé as “hackers on steroids,” “domestic terrorists,” and the “Internet hate machine”, 4chan users have frequently harassed, harassed and attacked individuals and groups⁶. Starting in 2003, the mass noun Anonymous became a popular 4chan meme and the self-designated, de-centralized group began raiding a variety of targets. For example in 2006, they frequently raided a social network site aimed at teens called Habbo Hotel. 4chan users who would pick identical avatars, spam on-screen text and block passage from the different chat rooms. Over the years, targets, like white supremacist radio host Hal Turner or child predators, have been singled out by 4chan users and Anonymous, as well as countless other victims (Jenkins, 2007). Frequently, preying on young social network and YouTube users, 4chan exploits online resources to locate real names for specific individuals as well as their addresses and phone numbers in order to barrage a given target with phone calls, food orders and other juvenile forms of harassment.

2008 marked a key shift for 4chan and the group of users employing the Anonymous moniker, as they organized global action against Scientology after the Church attempted to suppress a YouTube video (Cook, 2008). ‘Project Chanology’ marked the start of many highly organized, collaborative actions and a departure from the early, more childish, lulz. The campaign employed global protests and unique Internet-specific online tactics, like DDoS attacks⁷. Given the ‘hive mind’ nature of Anonymous, there is no single set of members, fixed agenda or specific goals. However, since the advent of the mass noun and its use on 4chan, there has been general slow movement to other sites and platforms like IRC. Gabriella Coleman (2011) charts the history, which begins with issues of free speech and policing online content, highlighted by Chanology and attacks on the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) or Sony Entertainment. Anonymous then shifted to “Operation Payback”, which was a defensive response to backlash against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange (Coleman, 2011). According to Coleman, there has been another major wave of changes starting with “OpLybia”, as censorship concerns have given way to a focus on human rights activism.

In many ways Anonymous grieving Habbo Hotel users is incongruent with the contemporary face — or facelessness — of Anonymous, as these acts no longer spring from 4chan. In addition, Anonymous can no longer be thought of a single mass noun — regardless of its original nebulous incoherence — as there are now several sects and splinter groups, each with unique enterprises and campaigns.

Although there is certainly still some overlap in users, it is increasingly problematic to conflate Anonymous with 4chan, not only because of this slow dispersal, but also because they are often unconnected and even at odds with one another. Finally, many of these Anonymous groups now communicate through social media platforms like Twitter, meaning the utterances no longer operate through 4chan's interface or within its groups.

Figure 4: posters on /v/ discuss the Anonymous group LulzSec.

The Personal Turn:

4chan's popularity and persistence is even more remarkable when contextualized. Over the past decade, the vast majority of popular Web sites have moved away from anonymity. Major social media sites, like Facebook, are fundamentally rooted in one's real life identity. There are hordes of GPS mobile phone technologies to mark one's actual location in virtual world programs. Numerous newspapers have eliminated comment sections or are implementing credit card registration to verify and mark identity. This general closing of the gap between online and off-line personas marks a dramatic development in the structure and experience of the Internet.

As a continuation of the phone phreaker era, much early Internet communication operated anonymously. This is not to say avatars and handles did not exist, and in fact, they rose to popularity rather quickly. Despite its frequent conflation with anonymity, pseudonymity (both traceable and untraceable) is a separate and distinct mode of being online. It is a communication mode reliant on a pseudonym or virtual stand-in. It can be as simple as having a nickname or as complicated as a 3D virtual avatar. Unlike an anonymous discourse, a digital persona is established, which can or cannot operate as an extension of one's real world self. Thus, there is a level of accountability, traceability, and reputation associated and attributed. With Web 2.0 and the rise of social media sites, pseudonymity is increasingly being replaced with what Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg coins, "ultimate" or "radical transparency"⁸. Zuckerberg goes as far as to state, anonymity embodies a "lack of integrity"⁹. This mode of discourse represents the closest bond between virtual spaces and the physical world outside networks. Many social media sites feature a person's likes, religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation, habits, hobbies, friends, family, finances, health, and even actual physical location. Rather than having no connection or varying degrees of connection through an avatar, this personal turn conflates one's virtual self and real world self. In social media terms: Facebook

wants to know how you are, Twitter wants to know what you are doing and Foursquare (<https://foursquare.com/>) wants to know where you are. Social media relies on an articulation of a lived social self.

Compounding this effect, many social network sites extend beyond their URL, including options to repost, comment or indicate opinions on other pages ranging from news stories to videos to blogs. Concurrently, with the concentration generated by a single login, like Facebook Connect, radical transparency boils over into multiple sites and follows a user across networks. The resulting online experience is open to capital, as tracking personal data, usage data and taste surveillance opens up online advertising and individually targeted marketing campaigns. As personalized searches increasingly become the dominant mode of Web navigation, social, economic and communal aspects change.

The push to a 'Web identity' especially through social media attests to this shift. In the early days of the Web, there was little corporate or brand presence beyond a single official Web page; now corporations have Twitter feeds, Facebook fan pages, Foursquare profiles and YouTube channels. Users may be seeking the value aspects of sites like Facebook, but following the personal turn, the exchange value of personal information and communication becomes inexorably tied to these same online interactions.

The discursive and the ontological

4chan and social media are divergent ends in a spectrum of Internet experiences. On one hand, there are personally based and accountable interactions that are open to capital. On the other, there is ephemeral, anonymous and often offensive content. So the question arises: how do we understand this distinction? Is it simply binary? A prism or time capsule for the ongoing changes to Internet culture? Or is the relationship between 4chan and post-Web 2.0 media more complicated? We need to ask broader questions in order to examine these distinct types of online communication — that is — to ask about *modes of being* online.

In many fields in which communication, creation and images overlap, the discursive aspects — usually identified explicitly through content, text or speech — are associated with the political. Larger questions — those often ontological in aim — align with the apolitical, the personal and the abstract¹⁰. In *Being and time*, Martin Heidegger writes that following antiquity “a dogma has taken shape which not only declares that the question of the meaning of being is superfluous, but even sanctions its neglect. It is said that being is the most universal and the emptiest concept”¹¹. This doctrine persists in many fields. Thanks to the conflation of aspects of discursive content to the contemporaneous and the ontological hinged to the timeless, the larger meta-aspects are cast as less pressing and too universal. However, these concerns are not only related, but are strategic in understanding media and media's political dimensions.

Thus, the question becomes not solely about divergent content between social media and 4chan, but how users interact with platforms, networks, discourse and other users. This paper draws a frame from Heidegger's articulation of two forms of

investigation: ontological inquiry, which focuses on being as such, and ontical inquiry, which is concerned with beings, entities or things in the world. In other words, rather than focusing solely on the content of the site (the text and images) or the userbase (through an ethnographic exploration), this paper will seek the *experience* of the site by way of ontological inquiry¹². The content and user community is clearly tied to this experience, but, as Heidegger's model suggests, the ontical and ontological inevitably tangle¹³.

Heidegger approaches the question of being through Dasein, which translates to 'everyday human experience', but does not actually locate a single conscious subject or a grand meaning-giving transcendental subject. Instead, Dasein is 'human being' in the sense that it can refer to both a trait of all persons or to an individual person¹⁴. Dasein is a means to understand being in a general sense: that which cultures, individuals, and institutions share (Dreyfus, 1991). As an entry point into the question of the meaning of being, Heidegger turns to the everyday, with the 'human being' which hold an understanding (although not necessarily clear or always acknowledged) of its own being — of its existence¹⁵. Embedded in specific cultural skills and practices, ontology is revealed from within a 'horizon of intelligibility', which is why Heidegger calls for a hermeneutics or interpretation of the experience of being through Dasein.

Unlike *Being and time*, this paper's project is not to question the nature of being as such, but rather think about the mediated experience of engaging in 4chan¹⁶. In lieu of dispensing with the ontic objects of the world — including the platform, code, networks and interface of 4chan — it will work from what Graham Harman (2002) calls our access to being to elucidate how partaking in 4chan opens up questions of 'being for us' — rather than 'being as such'. In other words, how different mediated online experiences lead to distinctive ontological encounters. With this distance in mind, there remains three strategic components garnered from Heidegger in this paper's framework. First, Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein should be thought about as 'being in the world'. This is not an object spatially located, like photographs in an album, but rather defined by involvement, as one is a photographer in the field of photography. The stress on totality, or the way 'being in' signals a kind of inhabiting or dwelling within, is important for 4chan as an experience¹⁷. Users dwell in the interface, which necessitates an engagement in networked connections, the site's code and platforms of hardware and software (operating system, browser, etc.). Add to this the stream of photos, images and text added through the interface and, of course, the masses of users — each with ensuing network connections, software and hardware systems — and all of this is embedded in a specific historic moment¹⁸.

Taking a cue from Heidegger, this paper will discuss the user 'being-in' the totality of these elements, rather than singling out an individual part of the experience. Despite the large scope, this remains the study of an object and thus bound to the ontic. It will not be the fundamental ontology of Heidegger. But, it will suggest how residing 'with-in' 4chan motions towards ontological questions or positions. The second key aspect drawn from Heidegger is to situate ontological concerns *through*

engagement. Heidegger's project relies on the disclosing, description and mapping of tasks — especially everyday tasks¹⁹. By turning to the experience of 4chan, rather than simply the static output or patterns of the user base, the 'horizon of intelligibility' for ontology appears. The third key idea gleaned is 'being in an involved way'. Asking how the totality of engaging in 4chan tunes or orientates users (and simultaneously how the community shapes and tunes the culture of 4chan) draws attention to key ontological aspects of self and otherness engrained in anarchic culture²⁰.

Heidegger stresses that ontology is not a grand overarching theory but a method that asks questions. Inspired by his unique brand of phenomenology, this paper will ask questions about the experience of 4chan's culture of anonymity and dissent. This is not a paper which illustrates Heidegger's ideas through a case study, nor suggests that 4chan operates like ideas developed in *Being and time*. Rather it positions the user as a 'being with ontological attitude', dwelling in a complex set of social, political and technological positions that should be understood in total and that being reveals itself through engagement with 4chan's particular mode of virtual contact. Built into this proposition — and counter to Heidegger's non-object oriented method — is that the code of 4chan as platform dovetails with the user base to create a culture of anonymity. Through this frame, we can both clarify what makes it unique and also see alternative, increasingly more prevalent, ways of being online in sites like Facebook. This frame does not override the content, especially given 4chan's often sexist, racist and homophobic discourse, but nor is it without political stakes. Ontological concerns are far from apolitical, as this exploration of 4chan demonstrates through the potentials of virtual anonymity.

Temporality and the experience of contingency

Within this framework, a LOLcat image is easily identifiable as discursive content on 4chan. It originates when someone posts it through the site's interface, in one of the 10 threads on a themed page or within an individual thread. This is all reliant on code generating a given message board, a site built for simultaneous threaded discussions by multiple users. The message board itself is not unique to 4chan; content, like LOLcats, frequently migrates to other sites. However, what is unique is the interface's focus on anonymity. It should be noted it is not true technical anonymity, as the site logs IP addresses, but the interface does not reveal them. The core culture of the site revolves around the *idea* of anonymity and anonymous speech.

This reduced connection between the user who engages the site and the content that appears, created by the anonymous interface, lowers personal responsibility and encourages experimentation. As Poole (2011) states, you gain freedom to say what you want and, indeed, by opening boards like /b/ to nearly any statement, image, idea, or commentary, 4chan fosters imagination, divergent opinions and variations. The structural organization around unattributed images and responses makes appropriation and adaptation key elements of discourse. Wide open and non-commercial terrain allows freedom and mobility for contributors. These

features are distinctive from social media's ability to track friends and family through personal profiles, which in turn demands responsibility for comments, as users are easily traceable. You are not only responsible for the current moment on Facebook, but through its archives, your communications are persist over time, which translates into long-term accountability.

So the initial layers of the experience exude inventiveness and imagination. This partially stems from decreased liability in discourse, but equally important is the experience of duration on 4chan. It is ephemeral, transitory and fleeting for several reasons. First, because old messages and images vanish as users post new ones, meaning each thread typically lasts mere minutes and in rare occasions a few hours²¹. Second, the site has no official archive. Once a thread disappears, it is gone. It should be noted there are paratexts to 4chan, with meme databases and an unofficial archive. However on 4chan proper, there is no option to view older posts, as there is on sites like Twitter or Facebook. Lastly, navigation of the site relies on refreshing.

Figure 5: A user on /b/ references their constant refreshing of the page

The pace of 4chan means statistically very few users view the same page at the same time. Instead, individuals see variations and reshuffles in similar and dissimilar content. In scrolling through posts from top to bottom, refreshing and repeating, new arrangements of the random images and comments emerge every time. Even in an individual thread, posts come so quickly and because the site does not update in real time, users must reload to see something new, meaning many will see different versions of the same thread. It is the combination of content with these elements that culminate in an encounter with anonymity, with a stranger in passing. It is a confrontation key to understanding 4chan as it is an ontological encounter with anonymity that engenders contingency²².

Contingency has several meanings and uses, but relative to 4chan, the definition of pure contingency is important: that which “neither necessary, nor impossible” (Ballinger, 2008). This would then preclude provisions for the unexpected, or it being a simply a synonym for chance or uncertainty²³. That which is neither necessary, nor impossible presents a unique instance, event and state of becoming as it the complete absence of certainty. Though lived reality is undoubtedly unpredictable, there are still parameters and patterns that govern and set bounds for the necessary and the impossible. Contingency should not be taken as a theory, but that which arises from engagement with 4chan’s interface. In ontological terms, it categorizes and ascends from the mode of being specific to experiencing the ephemeral culture of anonymity. To ‘dwell-in’ 4chan is to dwell within contingency.

On 4chan, contingency persists on several fronts. First, there is the aforementioned culture of creativity and temporality. Second there is the gambit of images and

posts; the directions of conversation and the mass of users that are neither necessary, nor impossible. Third, there is the meme. Coleman (2009) argues memes work “against” 4chan’s “volume of posts and responses” and “act as the locus of memory.” She notes that the “meme is that which procures because it circulates largely through constant modification” and it is “that which can unite a group of people which are otherwise dispersed and unconnected” (Coleman, 2009). The meme is a type of consistent recollection overcoming the gulf created by anonymity and temporality. They constantly return to act as the pillar of familiarity, standing against the stream of posts and responses. The meme moves against the unexpected.

However, Coleman also points to the constant modification of memes, as the common continually turns into the uncommon. Revision, re-contextualization and multiplicity drive memes and there is a ‘neither necessary, nor impossible’ way they can be combined with any statement, image, idea and philosophy. The meme is thus a reaction to, *and embodiment of*, contingency. The meme will not necessarily, nor impossibly be changed or altered and — equally important — the responses to memes or statements or images on the site are not necessarily going to follow conventions²⁴ because the anonymous interface creates infinite possible interactions.

The foregrounding of the memes should not overshadow the frequent and extensive practice of reposting identical content, the amount of non-meme centered images and discussion posts, as well as the focus on themed discussions in specific boards. For example /a/ or /v/ would have much clearer and well articulated patterns of discussion, than a board like /b/. However, this does not diminish the contingency of 4chan produced by the anonymous interface, but rather delineates channels for conversations that are ‘neither necessary, nor impossible’ and, in fact, creates the tide which the meme pushes and pulls against. Contingency through anonymity becomes the wellspring through which the expected repost, the variable non-meme and the unexpected meme emerge.

To recap: 4chan’s anonymous interface dovetails with its culture of anonymity within the discourse of the site. It results in contingency, reflected within the content as well as the temporal, ephemeral sensation garnered from browsing the site. The impossible task of taking in the entirety of the site (all boards, threads and discussion) because of the temporality and ongoing, unexpected turns in discourse, underlines the way contingency simultaneously operates within the content and the mediated mode of being. In other words, the anonymous interface and culture operate together to form contingency, which in turn, cascades into discourse and streams back towards the user, reflecting a unique, virtual ontological experience.

>MFW

If the user is categorized through an awareness of being — revealing itself through contingency’s potentials of experience — the ontological experience of 4chan asks core questions of being — of the self and the other. Here we turn away from Heidegger to Emmanuel Levinas²⁵. In Heidegger’s work, the stress on being never

falls on senses of exteriority, alterity or otherness, as being is all encompassing or all embracing²⁶. For Levinas, the failure of *Being and time* is that it overlooks the ethical aspects of experience: how one relates to otherness. For Levinas, this ethical encounter is the most basic level of philosophy. He articulates a drive to transcendence, or a desire to stand in relations with the other by moving beyond the self. It is a reach for alterity. Levinas argues Heidegger's ontological stance omits difference by reducing otherness and making everything dependent on the self. He thus pushes for a metaphysical stance in which there is obligation to otherness remaining other and questioning conceptions of the 'same'²⁷. These are clearly different, contradictory projects but as with Heidegger, rather than applying an in-depth reading of Levinas to 4chan, or attempting to navigate Levinas' philosophy by way of 4chan, aspects of his thought can be integrated into a separate productive frame.

Taking the totality²⁸ of the mediated experience, characterized by contingency through anonymity, and working with the user's 'ontological aware attitude' we can incorporate a key element of Levinas: the relationship to otherness²⁹. Although there are numerous discursive examples, perhaps the '>MFW' meme best illustrates the connection to otherness entangled inside the ontological experience of 4chan. An acronym for 'my face when', MFW accompanies a reaction image and text — usually a story, context or situation. There is a communal pool of reaction images, stills from movie or television programs for example. Yet, 'the neither necessary nor impossible' holds true and users unceasingly post new images to express a gambit of emotions from anger to frustration to happiness. The stories are characteristically narratives of the everyday, such as poor customer service. Although akin to the images, the possibilities for content are infinite.

Beyond the particulars of content, the meme expresses a subjective state through combinations of image and text, anger for example; it gives *my* face when. However, this meme exists in threads with other user's versions of >MFW (entailing huge varieties of differing reaction images and narratives). Thus the anonymous interface propels signs of the subjectivity of others through the continual push of that which is beyond the user; we get *their* face when. In most cases we have shared or acknowledgeable affectual states. But >MFW is also frequently a challenge by users, providing statements and opinions on previous comments or images. The self confronts otherness through that which is beyond it, through disagreement. By having the ever-present possibility of surprise, we are never in control and yet we are not necessarily distanced or necessarily separated. >MFW illustrates the contingent connection between self and others through the complexities of images, acts of constant variation, and gaps of anonymity.

Figure 6: An example of >MFW

Similar to >MFW, ‘green text stories’ play with the code connected to the ‘>’ character to turn text green³⁰. They were exceptionally popular on the now defunct /r9k/ board frequently focusing on experiences of social awkwardness, confusion and relationships at school or with family. ‘Implying’ also employs the ‘>’ designation, but suggests an often comedic or contradictory subtext to a previously posted comment or image. Throughout the varieties of memetic practices attached to ‘>’ character, subjectivity is foregrounded — not in terms of a personal or private psychological state — but through being and the being of others. To experience these discursive practices is to face being beyond the self, forcing questions of self, other and being in general.

This specific confrontation with contingent alterity is truly radical as it historically unparalleled. One could meet a stranger on the street or appear with a crowd of anonymous individuals, but after the initial encounter contingency diminishes. The stranger is embodied; the person in the crowd is accountable for their actions. There is never full knowledge of a person in these circumstances, but the unique expression of the unknown other reveals itself in some sense. Otherness exists, but is jumbled: it is impossible for them to be other than themselves. 4chan’s anonymous interface, heightened by temporality and unique by contingency, presents virtuality in its fullest form. It is encounters with groups of strangers, who can appear and disappear without a trace, an audience neither detected, nor known and a discourse of images and text beyond the individual user and out of the individual user’s control.

Intensifying the broad push of otherness is the mass of lurkers on 4chan. Threads are marked by comments and images by anonymous users, but the weight of non-contributing members is palpable. One’s utterances could drop off the site, only to be claimed by another user in a different thread. The interface allows users to glean content, encouraging an audience to echo or change or manipulate statements; the lurker is yet another neither necessary, nor impossible, condition. It is important to again note that 4chan is not technically fully anonymous; there are tripcode users and attempts to enact spatial or temporal bounds through photographs with ‘timestamps.’ However the site revolves around a culture, or philosophy, of anonymity.

Perhaps this is why analogies and metaphors from the non-virtual fail to fully encapsulate the 4chan experience. They are not truly a crowd, as the users are, in the vast majority of cases, individuals in separate locations. Unlike common message board and chatroom interfaces, 4chan does not generate a list of online users. They are neither a real, nor virtual, crowd. In a way, the user is also not necessarily a stranger, as the original Anonymous designation suggests, “*We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget*”³¹. By simply accessing the site, one enters the fold of group anonymity rather than standing outside it. How then do we understand 4chan’s users? Given the discursive aspects, the figure of the troll or court jester would seem apt, but again these align to single, self-contained figures. 4chan remains the phantom, amorphous, non-individual and non-personalized cloud. On 4chan, you are both part of and outside anonymous flow; you can create a meme but never own it; you can start a discussion but never control it; you can perform or create a spectacle like a jester but you are also observing it.

Focusing then not on the person, but the act, becomes one way to articulate the community: not the troll, but the act of trolling; not the joker, but the act of joking. By turning from the noun to the verb, there is a better sense of the user experience. We encounter the actions of others: others posting pictures, typing text and lurking. This articulation is essential as it stresses the alterity engrained in the experience of contingency. Rather than building a sense of the other from oneself, we have actions both shared and unique; we have otherness in a plural sense that is outside and irreducible to the self. The actions by uncontrolled and anonymous others continually push beyond the simple binaries of you and I, self and single other, troll and victim, joker and audience member.

Social media and the self

Would Facebook asking, “what’s on my mind” or Twitter asking, “what’s happening” present this same glimpse of alterity as >MFW? Could this not just be the discourse of virtual networks? The push of alterity through the contingent encounter of anonymity is not universal to all online mediated experiences. By framing the ontological experience of social media, the anonymous interfaces potentially radically nature is made all the more discernable. Unlike 4chan, Facebook relies on individuals that one knows, or at least those that have been accepted as “friends”. Facebook’s tagline states, “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people *in your life*” (italics added). This is a key step away from the experience of contingency, as those you interact with are necessarily approved; engaging with a truly anonymous stranger is rendered impossible³².

4chan has three possible actions: start a thread by posting an image; respond to a post with text or an image; and, lastly to lurk by just reading text/posts. 4chan features a minimal interface, yet it is infinite in variation and possibility. On Facebook, you can update your status, read the status of others, upload or browse photos and videos, join or create events, join or create groups, send private messages, chat and edit profiles by revealing personal details, such as religion, political views, quotes, favorite TV shows and movies. In Facebook, this personal

accounting occurs in real time. Unlike the randomness of refreshing 4chan, what appears in your feed will always be consistent and persistent.

This is not to say you determine content, but rather you control the parameters of those who produce content in your feed. Identical “friends” lists will create identical feeds. This uniformity could only happen on 4chan if multiple users all refreshed at the exact same moment and the packets arrived and loaded at precisely the same time, a very difficult task. Within controlled content, identification of voice is clear. If we wanted to become even more private, we could send a message or chat. We can move further and further away from contingent encounters into increasingly controlled discourse. Throughout these private messages, chats, or status updates there is a connection to singular, persistent and personal identity, which creates accountability and responsibility. Rather than dialectical dissent and experimentation, there are strict rules and social codes, which lapse into — and borrow heavily from — non-virtual spheres.

Hence, there are no amorphous strangers, just a narrow set of contacts. A virtual stand-in for non-virtual personal conversations replaces the happenstance of 4chan’s interface and the variation and indeterminacy of memes. Rather than ephemeral contingency, we have ‘radical transparency’, all of which is reduced to its relationship to the self. However, responsibility and accountability are not inherently bad, but the parameters of this encounter do contain key ontological repercussions for being online.

Like

What does it mean on Facebook to “like” something or to change your profile interests, tastes, religious outlooks or philosophy? What does it mean to accept an invitation to a group or to go to an event? To start with there is uniformity. To “like” a musician or philosopher or film is to do so in a singular way. There is no grey area — one likes or does not like, all of which is different from disliking something, an option not offered on Facebook. Outside the Facebook algorithm of “liking” is a complex, abstract and highly subjective state. Inside the algorithm, it is a way to cancel differences. The world is reduced to liking x or y in the same way. People are tagged in photographs, effectively labeled and reduced. The Facebook experience strips expressiveness and eliminates multiple subjectivities and nuances.

By way of individual experience, one can narrate and reinforce their own subjectivity (one knows why they like x; one attends an event and has their own affectual memory) and from there, can reduce all other experiences to their own (x number of people like y in the same way; all event attendees experienced it in a similar manner). Granted, trolls and griefers can disrupt the experience of Facebook and you do experience other ideas and arguments. Certainly, 4chan often contains the same content, same contributors and same actions, like Facebook. Yet, there is a sharp discrepancy because the experience of Facebook lacks the experience of contingency.

4chan's ontological involvement encompasses questions of being; the highly creative, amorphous and boundless experience of contingency challenges the dominance of a single subjectivity. Content on Facebook reflects substantiation of the sole user, restricting the ontological encounter and reducing the cascading sense of inter-subjectivities. Facebook does not ask questions of being but rather eliminates complexity, hencing a sense of similarity. Facebook provides an illusion that you can 'know' someone — how they feel and what they like. It promotes uniform forms of interaction, homogenizes differences and, like most social media, reduces and totalizes alterity.

The politics of contingency

Why does this ontological experience matter? The answer unfolds on three fronts. First, there is the politics of 'being in' contingency. To discuss the experience, the best method is to return to the specific definition: that which is 'neither necessary, nor impossible'. This condition rebuffs and denies fixed meanings, systems of hierarchy and regiments of pattern. Contingency supplants randomness or the alternative outcome of an event or action, because it is always in a state of becoming. Its ongoing, anti-systematic nature is precisely what makes it political.

Capital, especially in online environments, relies on patterns and predictability. With context-specific Web content, the semantic Web and personalized searches, serendipitous encounters are reduced and targeted advertising emerging in its wake. The reduction of contingency opens the possibility of capital. LOLcats, for example, became oversaturated on 4chan, remixing and original content subsided and the meme generally diminished. On a site like icanhazcheeseburger, with traceable pseudonymity and strictly regimented content, the meme becomes a profitable media object. The simultaneous lure and threat of contingency ends, capital begins. It should be noted that 4chan depends on small banners for advertising, but these ads do not alter the basic flavor of the site, with a dedicated and active community that seems to be outside the circuits and algorithms of an increasingly dominant Internet economy.

The second key front for the politics of contingency is awareness of the other. Framing 4chan as a mode of being gives way to alterity. Given its space outside the economy of social media and the personalized Web, 4chan controverts the individual to assigned roles. The anonymous interface produces an ongoing subjectivity in a state of becoming, generating a fortuitous encounter and challenging the self. There is a self-generation of the unexpected within the community and by the mods, which further maintains the experience. /b/ perhaps encapsulates this best, as the mods frequently add word filters, music, animated backgrounds and new banner messages. Injecting happenstance in the already simple interface illustrates the constant experience of abandoned surprise.

User experiences, as well as content and discussions, dovetail within this shifting frame, manifesting subversion. In an attempt to reduce spam, Poole began using reCAPTCHA anti-spam technology, so users would have to type two disguised

words to participate in discussion, but even this became part of memetic discourse and individuals began displaying words in comically literal ways. The general air of rabble-rousing ensures disorder and an onslaught of subjectivity — never fixed on an individual experience — but rather subjective otherness in general.

Figure 7: A temporary background on /v/ added by mods.

Could such a 'being-aware' ontological engagement give way to empathy and feelings of responsibility to the other? On a theoretical level, phenomenological implications exist and to an extent, there is a plethora of evidence in the coming together of community through memes, raids and the daily sharing and discussion of ideas and opinions. But 4chan's anarchic, chaotic and critical elements do not function to coalesce social bonds. This tendency of anonymity, pseudonymity and the use of false identities conflict with empathy as it frequently enables bullying on social media sites, supplies the avenues for bellicose hate speech online and nurtures spam enterprises. However, the championing of social bonds above else necessitates certain shortfalls. French philosopher Jacques Rancière contends:

A political community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself ... The classical form of political conflict opposes several people in one: the people inscribed in the existing forms of law and the constitution; the people embodied in the State; the one ignored by this law or whose right the State does not recognize and the one that makes its claims in the name of another right that is yet to be inscribed in facts³³.

In seeking to reduce conflict, consensus suppresses differences within a community, assigning every person a correct place within the consequent social order. Evacuating dissensus or the political core of the community.

It is at the meeting point between instability, contingency, change and alterity that 4chan's interface is truly radical and the third aspect of the politics of contingency surfaces: a culture of automatic dissent. Through insult, rebuttal and mimetic attack, no comment or image or idea is sacred. An element of contingency's 'neither necessary, nor impossible' paragon is an embedded element of dissent. Aall ideas

are open to criticism, all ideals can be scrutinized and perhaps most importantly, any positioning of authority will be undermined.

It is tempting to build a frame for 4chan which looks at cultural capital, in which knowledge of memes and in-jokes establishes creditability. However, without markers of identity³⁴ there is no way to accrue credit. Those that attempt to do so with tripcodes face the wrath of anonymous users. Unlike sites that use 'karma' or 'upvote' systems, there is no way deny or suppress content on 4chan³⁵. There is a constant rupturing in the fabric, as the billowing anonymous mass resists, fights, defies and combats anyone who tries to rise above or tether the community. Knowledge of a topic within non-/b/ boards may be appreciated by community³⁶ and understanding memes, unicodes or slang certainly marks proficiently using the site, but cultural capital is a difficult concept to forge in a culture of dissent. From the deliberate misrepresentation of content to purposeful feigning of knowledge to individuals pretending to be multiple posters in order to undermine posts to the unrelenting objections against those that claim authority, there is a constant level of trolling locked into the experience³⁷. Although this dissensus may seem removed from the lowbrow discourse and vulgar content, the larger ontological frame should not be ignored. As a mode of being, the experience goes beyond varying opinions. There is a continuing redistribution of voice, challenge to expertise and effacing of those who position themselves in authority.

Lastly, the push of alterity, contingency and anonymity through the site's experience generates a virtual mode of being, with both online ramifications *and* possibilities in reality. In the recent Middle East uprising, individual and collective action involved the potentials of networked organization and communication³⁸. It is important to note how protestors and organizers consistently broke terms of service and user agreements of platforms like Facebook by having multiple accounts, fake accounts and spreading misinformation, effectively inserting contingency into closed systems and unraveling 'radical transparency' by evoking anonymity (Huneidi, 2011). It could be broadly stated that Facebook's rather conservative experience can be altered with progressive possibilities through anonymity and pseudonymity.

Conclusion

4chan is simultaneously a simple message board and a complex community. It is a group of individuals, but one that always lacks cohesion. It has general tendencies, but it also has immediate objections and opposition to those tendencies. It has huge creative force and massive popular appeal, and yet remains at times crass, abhorrent and unpleasant³⁹. It is a productive meme factory, yet at its heart, it is a space of idleness. Beyond or perhaps through these contradictions, 4chan presents a mode of being online enveloped in anonymity and shaped by contingency. It stresses otherness, dissent, creativity, variation and plurality.

It seems clear that the Web is continuing to become more and more personal, self-rooted and narrow. Rather than utilizing basic virtual elements of the Internet, we are looping towards a replica of our lives in networks, open to capital and closed to

experimentation. Indeed, instead of creating a mirror of reality, we might use these elements to facilitate a culture of creativity, modification, dissent and free discourse. Although there are attempts on 4chan to overcome its interface, the culture of anonymity remains dominant. Through this prevailing anonymous interface stems a deeply unique sense of contingency and alterity, which stresses a common world (unattributed actions, pool of memes, shared affective states) and simultaneously a radical otherness. By thinking through not just what it is said but how it is said, we gain insight into different modes of being inside networks. We may not find 4chan appealing, but anonymity and contingency prompt political and ethical ramifications. As such, 4chan embodies an ontological position filled with both promise and peril.

About the author

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Notes

¹ Jenkins, 2010.

² Michaels, 2010.

³ Smith, 2008.

⁴ A recent study by researchers at MIT concluded that only 0.05 percent of posts on /b/ contained tripcodes. This number drops when considering joke or non-recurring monikers like 'David' or 'OP' for the original poster (Bernstein, *et al.*, 2011).

⁵ Poole, 2009.

⁶ Despite Fox News no longer streaming its video on 4chan, it is widely available on video

⁷ In a DDoS, or distributed denial of service attack, phantom traffic overwhelms a Web site to a point of crashing a given server or servers.

⁸ Quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2010, p 209.

⁹ Ibid, p 199.

¹⁰ Although any number of discipline specific debates could be employed as a case study to illustrate this point, photography works well. There is a tradition of casting phenomenological approaches, such as those of Barthes, Kracauer, Metz or Sontag as unstable, ungrounded and even silly; John Tagg for example, stresses that no meaning arises from the ontological embodiment of a "paltry piece of chemically

discoloured paper” but rather it emerges from “definite techniques and procedures, concrete institutions, and specific social relations” (Tagg, 1988, pp. 4–5). For a second example see: Dudley Andrew’s (1978) paper “The neglected tradition of phenomenology in film theory.” It is a brilliant exploration of how certain philosophical traditions have never garnered favor or traction in film studies.

¹¹ Heidegger, 2010, p 2.

¹² Heidegger avoids the term ‘experience’ — along with terms like consciousness and subjectivity — as he is rallying against Cartesian separation of mind and body and much of the book is addressing Husserl’s notion of the transcendental ego. However, I would like to locate ‘experience’ not as a disembodied mind taking in the world, but the totality of entire phenomenological experience.

¹³ . As Heidegger states, “Dasien is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being. Thus it is constitutive of the being of Dasein to have, in its very being, a relation of being to this being. And in turn means that Dasein understands itself in its being in some way and with some explicitness. It is proper to this being it be disclosed to itself through its being. *Understanding of being is itself a determination of being of Dasein*. The ontic distinction of Dasein lies in the fact that it is ontological” (2010, p. 13).

¹⁴ The term should not be understood technically, but rather through its colloquial roots as an everyday term — a kind of ‘we’ with an ontological understanding or questioning attitude.

¹⁵ Hubert Dreyfus (1991) does an excellent job explaining Heidegger’s position on social practice in his monograph entitled *Being-in-the-world*. He draws on socialization, pointing out “our practices embody pervasive response, discriminations, motor skills etc., which add up to an interpretation of what it is to be a person, an object, an institution, etc.” (p. 17). These “taken- for-granted practices” — his example is how far or close to stand to people in public — stem from an array of other understandings — for standing would depend on comprehension of “bodies, intimacy, sociality” which “reflects an understanding of what it is to be a human being” (pp. 18–19). So it is not an unchanging or innate mindset but an embodied network of principles or a complex set of “beliefs, rules or principles” that we “dwell in” (p. 22). Dreyfus quotes a 1925 lecture by Heidegger: “This common world, which is there primarily and into which every maturing Dasein first grows, as the public world, governs every interpretation of the world and of Dasein” (p. 23).

¹⁶ There is a core level of incompatibility that should be acknowledged between Heidegger’s work and 4chan as object of study, given his critique of technology, reservations about the governing of humans through science and his nostalgia for simplicity.

¹⁷ The key difference here is signaled by ‘being in’ versus ‘being-in’.

¹⁸ See note #13.

¹⁹ Frequently through the idea of ‘a dasein’ rather than ‘dasein’ as a larger concept.

²⁰ Although this presents a key break from Heidegger, as *Being and time* works towards arguments of the self. Ideas of otherness and alterity are not necessarily at

odds with Heidegger, as many later existentialist philosophers demonstrate, but they are certainly out of *Being and time* goals or Heidegger's direct interest.

²¹ This is illustrated best on /b/. Content on the less frequented visited boards, like /fa/, shuffles slowly and potentially could last a number of days.

²² To elaborate for clarity: the 'user with an ontological attitude' faces a unique 'positioning of being' by facing 4chan's fleeting culture of anonymity because of its scope. If ontology requires thinking about being not just as things or stuff, but as a coming or emergence into appearance — being rather than beings — the swath of anonymity entails a massive presence or huge set of possibilities for being.

²³ Contingency's most frequent usage in social sciences refers to organizational qualities. Typically associated with 'rational systems perspective', authors like Tom Burns argued for multiple organizational structures, dependent on the specifics of environment and context. In literary and media studies, the term is frequently employed as a quality associated with modernity, which connotes instability or chance. This paper hopes to place contingency hermeneutically in the present (through Heidegger's notion of being 'present in present') as a key part of the constructed experience of 4Chan.

²⁴ Even though they often do.

²⁵ Specifically his work *Totality and Infinity*.

²⁶ As it is coupled to his sense of totality. However, Heidegger does make the distinction between the totality of beings and being itself — this paper's concern with an experience grounded in the former, motioning towards the later.

²⁷ As Levinas states, "A calling into question of the same — which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same — is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thought and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transience, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (1969: p 43).

²⁸ Again, this totality does not hold true fidelity with Heidegger, but rather operates as a way to talk about ontological relations with sets of operations, receptions, discourses along with the interface, code and platform — all in a dynamic circuit with socio-political, cultural and historic contexts. Not to stress unity throughout these elements — as unity would suggest unity around the self. This paper's concern is with the way these elements operate in complex, disjointed circuits manifesting an experience that unfolds into contingency, which then opens up questions of being and by extension questions of self, otherness and dis-similarity.

²⁹ To stress the point once more: this framework *draws* from Heidegger and Levinas, rather than fully employs their methods, goals or conclusions.

³⁰ '>' was intended to quote other users (it is still described as such in 4chan's frequently asked questions), but has morphed into several different conversational cues.

³¹ There is also the derogatory suffixes common on the site: new users are ‘newfags’, site veterans are ‘oldfags’, users of /b/ are /b/tards, etc. Despite the obvious offence of such terms, they indicate a kind of belonging through interaction.

³² There is trolling in groups, but this still relies on pseudonymity or persistent identity.

³³ Rancière, 2009, p. 188-189.

³⁴ In most cases, even the most basic message boards contain a user name and user post count.

³⁵ Users can ‘sage’ a thread, which means adding to it without bumping it back to the first page, but this does not actively propel it into deletion.

³⁶ The more frequent use of tripcodes on non-/b/ boards would attest to this.

³⁷ Though most present on /b/ this experience exists across all of 4chan. The practice of raiding other boards also highlights how all board’s conversations are open to objection and sabotage.

³⁸ Although one must recognize the role of technology: this paper aligns to Richard Grusin’s (2011) argument that “All individual and collective action, revolutionary or otherwise, happens at a particular historical moment and is enabled (but not determined) by the potentialities (social, cultural, economic, human, technical, natural, affective, and so forth). At this moment those potentialities include, but are not limited to, networked media. To continue to argue over whether the ongoing revolutions in the Middle East ... are ‘caused’ by social media or by ‘the people’ or ‘the masses’ or ‘the desire/will for freedom’ is to operate with an impoverished account of human agency”. Some of the specific ‘technical potentials’ throughout the Arab Spring have included the use Tor network technology to mask location and enable anonymous use of the Web, greasemonkey scripts to avoid governmental phishing campaigns and social media (used outside and within the bounds of terms of service).

³⁹ The majority of this paper focuses on /b/, both because it is the most popular and the lack of focus makes it the best embodiment of contingency. But no board is free of the established tendencies of the site that are most prevalent on /b/.

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