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# Beyond the board: a thematic analysis of political actions from 4chan's /pol/ board

Kosta Bovan <sup>1</sup>✉ & Matej Mikašinović-Komšo <sup>1</sup>

This article aims to understand the organisational practices of digital political actions on 4chan's /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) board, as well as the underlying worldview within which those actions were nested. By using a qualitative thematic analysis of 21 threads, several themes were identified regarding preferred goals, methods, content, dissemination strategies, and worldview of intentional, orchestrated political actions with supposed real-world effects. Results show that the observed political actions were bottom-up, non-hierarchical, and collective actions, through which collective identity was established despite the almost complete anonymity of the /pol/ board. Additionally, the political actions were marked by the negative perception of Western liberal democracy, extremely negative attitudes toward the Left, minorities, and progressive liberals, antisemitism, and racism - values closely related to the far-right. Although the goals of /pol/ political actions differ, the dominant broader goal is to "redpill the normies" - indoctrinate the general population into denouncing liberal democratic ideology and accepting the far-right worldview.

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia. ✉email: [kosta.bovan@fpzg.hr](mailto:kosta.bovan@fpzg.hr)

## Introduction

During the 2016 US presidential elections, Hillary Clinton's campaign did something unprecedented - it published a document outlining the evolution of a popular internet meme *Pepe the Frog* into an alt-right symbol (Singal 2016). Regardless of the motivation of those that created and shared racist/anti-semitic Pepe variants, they clearly impacted the presidential election when a candidate of a major political party felt the need to address it. This usage of memes and new forms of internet communication are an example of a new type of political activism, one deeply embedded within digital culture and practices (McDonald 2015; Halupka 2016). Although not exclusively, new online forms of political action, that employ memes, trolling, and other aspects of online culture, have been extensively used by the political (far) right (Donovan et al. 2022). Some of the most ardent hubs from which this type of content, such as the Pepe the Frog meme, emerged, are found outside of mainstream platforms (Marwick and Lewis 2017). What we are witnessing is a seemingly carefully planned and organised method of subversively disseminating extremist political narratives and thought with the goal of contaminating digital spaces (Phillips 2018). Therefore, researching far-right online spaces and communities, especially their organisational practices, is crucial to understanding how their messages spread, which should raise the citizens' and media's awareness of the dangers of engaging with online far-right content.

A prime example of such online spaces is the Politically Incorrect board /pol/, a subforum of the notorious website 4chan. Despite studies on /pol/'s common racist, anti-semitic and homophobic content (Colley and Moore 2022; Zannettou et al. 2020), as well as its far-right, alt-right, and white supremacy tendencies (Woods and Hahner 2019; Winter 2019; Stern, 2019), less is known about the organisational practices that make up various political activities on /pol/ (Hine et al. 2017; but see Tuters 2021). Therefore, in this article we focus on the development of political actions that originated on /pol/. Furthermore, since any political action is nested within a certain worldview or ideology, this article also aims to show what is the underlying worldview of /pol/'s political actions - the understanding of politics, democracy, society, and /pol/'s role in the world. While these political actions do not necessarily represent the whole /pol/ community, nor the whole repertoire of online political participation (DeVries 2021; Beraldo 2022), this study offers a view of organisational practices of political actions of an online community that is characterised by a commitment to anonymity, and by far-right content (Mudde 2019; Baele et al. 2021). In the first section we present an overview of studies dealing with the relationship between the Internet and political action, as well as 4chan's history and communication specificities. Next, we present the methodology of our study - a qualitative thematic analysis of /pol/ board discussions in the period between 2014 and 2020, in which political actions were proposed, developed, and executed. Lastly, we present and discuss findings in the context of collective online political actions of the far-right, and their importance for the general public and the media.

## The Internet and political action

Ever since its creation, the internet has provided hope for increased political engagement of under-represented demographic groups (Correa and Jeong 2010; Hirzalla and van Zoonen 2010; Krueger 2002; Sasaki 2017), and citizens who are dissatisfied with conventional modes of political expression (Marsh and Akram 2015), or politicians and the party system (Dalton 2008; Cammaerts et al. 2014; Sloam 2014). Various globally important political movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab

Spring and Euromaidan protests, utilised online communication advantages to plan and organise (Kim and Lim 2020). The changes that those digital technologies made in the dynamics of public mobilisation were so great that authors, such as Bennett and Segerberg (2012), argued for a different style of political action, distinctive from collective action, called connective action. Whereas collective action is coordinated by organisations - notably by mobilising others through group identification and collective identity framing - connective action is "led" by digital technology, which provides the mechanism for coordination of self-motivated, personalised political action (for an alternative take, see Chen et al. (2021)). In place of firm identities, membership, and identification, users connect and participate through personalised expression, by sharing ideas, images, and links over social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In other words, it enables individuals to connect to like-minded users and media, communicate with them, facilitating participation and mobilisation (Devries and Majlaton 2021), as well as developing collective identities (Wiedemann 2014).<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, authors indicate negative aspects of online political activism. For example, Bouvier and Cheng (2019) pointed out that despite the usefulness of social networking sites, they do not reflect the whole public; they lack rational argumentation; have the potential for radicalising protests and increasing polarisation; they can be used by the state in authoritarian regimes for control of dissent; as well as by the far-right and other extreme and non-democratic groups (see also Bouvier and Rosenbaum, 2020). Through use of the internet, far-right activists have been influencing culture by spreading radical ideas and ideology through online media content to reach the broader public from their fringe communities (Kearney 2019; Winter 2019; Armstrong 2021). Far-right content is usually masked within humorous memes that are "ironically" shared online, or used for trolling (Woods and Hahner 2019), which elicits online responses (from liberals and/or mainstream media) (Donovan et al. 2022). These responses further the meme's virality and online presence of far-right content. This has the potential to affect the broader public, either by expanding the socially acceptable issue positions and political discourse (Nagle 2017), or by challenging the cultural and political status quo. Thus, it is important to study online communities and spaces within which this type of content and online activities are developed.

## 4chan and /pol/

One example of such a space is 4chan. Founded in 2003 (Hine et al. 2017), it became a popular website for internet memes and internet culture, while also becoming a space for the unmoderated and free discussion, as well as promotion of extreme political ideologies and offensive culture (Jokubauskaite and Peeters 2020). Despite this, 4chan is used by many users, who have formed collective identities and communities over its 76 boards, for various needs and purposes, both wholesome and extreme (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015). These communities of users "... share a common idea of what the board is about, a spirit and attitude that are undefined but present, constituting an underlying unwritten etiquette" (ibid, p. 487). The most (in)famous boards on 4chan are /b/ (Random) and /pol/ (Politically Incorrect). Both boards are sources of innovation on the broader mainstream Web culture, and boards with the most active, organised, and vocal communities. /b/'s community was initially the most active, with a collective identity defined by trolling activities (Phillips 2013), a practice "...which legitimises the use of nearly any means to anger or fool others for the entertainment of the troll and his crowd" (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015 p.

487). These trolling activities (such as the 2006's Habbo Hotel raids, and the 2008's Over 9000 Penises Oprah hoax) consisted of coordinated and planned strategies, which spread disturbing content, caused dissent, enticed disagreements, and pushed for chaos in communities. Notable methods included the use of raids, DDOS attacks (distributed denial-of-service), doxxing, ordering massive amounts of pizza and/or SWAT teams to the victim's home address, and spamming images or messages (Coleman 2014). Regardless of the method used, the trolling activities were based on a careful exploitation of sensitive topics and a keen understanding of the media's desire for sensationalism and profit, in order to reach the wider public, exploit their reactions, and generate laughter (so-called "lulz") (Phillips 2013). This trolling mentality, strategy, and method eventually gave birth to the hacktivist group Anonymous on /b/. Anonymous rose to fame with their 2008's Project Chanology - a wide-scale trolling campaign against the Church of Scientology, which paved the way for further similar activities, named "operations". Through the existence and activity of Anonymous, /b/'s trolling was augmented to include a political nature, turning raids into political activities (Phillips 2015).

/pol/ was created in 2011 as a "containment board" for the ever-growing politically extreme discussions on 4chan (Tuters and Hagen 2019, p. 6). In it, politics are discussed in ways that stray from conventional and politically correct discursive rules. As a result, its content is inappropriate and violent, with little moderation or control (Ludemann 2018) - antisemitism and racism are commonly found in /pol/ discourse (Zannettou et al. 2020), alongside hate speech (Hine et al. 2017). It became the most popular board on the site (Tuters and Hagen 2019), rising to prominence during the 2016 US Presidential election (Jokubauskaite and Peeters 2020) as an extremist alt-right community (despite housing users of other ideologies). Its activities included endorsing Donald Trump, raiding<sup>2</sup> YouTube to spread hate speech (Hine et al. 2017), and propagating anti-semitism (Zannettou et al. 2020), as well as alternative facts and news on mainstream social networks, notably through politicising the use of memes (Zannettou et al. 2018). As such, /pol/ is considered to be an influential disseminator of political, anti-semitic, and racist memes (Zannettou et al. 2020), due to its ability to mass-produce and heavily push them (Zannettou et al. 2018). For the alt-right /pol/ users, a crucial aspect of /pol/ discussions and organised activities is the idea of being "redpilled" (Matrix reference) - a radicalisation process through which new users are converted to the /pol/ cause, by learning through discussions "how the world really is" (Mountford 2018).

Similarly to /b/ and Anonymous, /pol/ used trolling as part of their strategies of public political actions to manipulate media outlets (such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and CNN.com), and hijack public narratives to greatly expand the reach and visibility of their extremist beliefs (Phillips 2018). As noted by the Oxygen of Amplification report (ibid), instead of directly advertising its extreme beliefs to the public, /pol/ deliberately designed their public communication to include ironic, over-the-top, sensationalist statements. These statements and narratives were picked up by mainstream media, who frequently ran stories and articles on them, essentially becoming unwilling and unaware mouthpieces of extremism, despite condemning it in their articles. In doing so, their ideas could reach the public indirectly, influencing and potentially radicalising them on a level beyond the organic possibilities of /pol/ (ibid).

Regardless of their differences, both /b/ and /pol/ share 4chan's distinct features - the almost complete user anonymity, who need not register nor create an account to participate in discussions, and the ephemeral nature of its content - as new threads are made, old ones get deleted (Ludemann 2018). Compared to

mainstream social networking sites (e.g. Facebook or X, formerly Twitter), these communication aspects make up a distinct environment for developing collective actions and identities. For example, in their study on Anonymous, Wiedemann (2014, p. 322) points out that anonymity and ephemerality make Anonymous "a hybrid of swarm and network", thereby creating new aesthetic and political practices, such as the joint creation of content by users, the spontaneity of the agenda development process, or the high speed of mobilisation. She concludes that Anonymous manages to create a ("late-modern mediated") collectivity through collective behaviour, despite its apparent lack of stable shared beliefs and ideology (Uitermark 2020). However, while there are studies on organisational practices and "weapons of choice" of political actions of /b/ and Anonymous (e.g., Wiedemann, 2014; Coleman 2014; Uitermark 2020), studies on /pol/ highlight only the use of memetic methods and overall impact of notable organised collective actions (Ewerhart 2023; Bach et al. 2018). With some exceptions (e.g., Kasimov 2021), there has been little study of /pol/'s organisational practices, i.e., how political actions came to be and how /pol/ users decided on a particular direction of action.

### Research questions and methodology

The goal of this study is to analyse two aspects of /pol/'s political actions. Firstly, we are interested in the organisational practices and goals of these actions. Secondly, we are interested in the worldview underlying those political actions. Specifically, what views of politics, democracy, society, and /pol/'s role in the world were present in the discussions on organising various political actions?

Our understanding of /pol/ is informed by big data quantitative studies on /pol/ (e.g. Hine et al. 2017; Zannettou et al. 2018; Zannettou et al. 2020), and by an array of qualitative studies with diverse theoretical underpinnings and methods (e.g. Hagen & Tuters 2021; Kasimov 2021; Ludemann 2018; Mikišinić-Komšo 2020). Regardless of the approach, some authors point out that /pol/ is characterised by far-right (Mudde 2019; Baele et al. 2021), alt-right (Woods and Hahner 2019; Winter 2019), or white-supremacist ideologies (Stern 2019), while others offer a more nuanced view of /pol/, claiming that even though such ideas are present (even prevalent) in /pol/, there is "historical and contemporary contention about the identity(ies) of the /pol/ community" (Colley and Moore 2022, p. 13; see also Devries 2021). These nuances are better identified via qualitative in-depth methods, such as discourse analysis or thick description, and/or by focusing on a set of particular threads. For example, by focusing on general threads (recurring and thematically coherent threads maintained by dedicated users (Bach et al. 2018)) researchers can simplify the data selection and search (via keywords) of the otherwise vast and diverse 4chan data (Jokubauskaite and Peeters 2020). Opting for such a focus helps analyse a continuous discussion on a singular topic that would otherwise be difficult to grasp due to 4chan's ephemerality. Finally, as was mentioned above, we lack systematic studies of organisational practices of /pol/'s collective political actions.

Thus, to answer our research questions, we employ a thematic analysis, inductively searching for themes, i.e., patterns of (shared) meanings, in raw information available from /pol/ (Boyatzis 1998). This means that we do not have an a priori set of themes or sub-themes that we expect to find. With this analysis we are looking for "experiences, meanings and the reality of participants", articulated through user discussions (Braun and Clarke 2006 p. 81). However, by following our relatively broad research questions, we are not merely looking to identify and describe themes that come up as answers to them, but to "identify

or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (ibid, p. 84). Since discussions on /pol/ include numerous topics (numbering in millions), we had to focus our search. 4plebs, the website that archives /pol/ discussions, started archiving /pol/ on November 29<sup>th</sup> 2013, so we confine our research to the period from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, until December 31<sup>st</sup> 2020. Furthermore, this is the period in which /pol/’s activities gained major political traction. To find discussions that best fit our research questions, we focus on threads containing the term “operation” in the title/opening post. Within the 4chan vocabulary, this term has a long-lasting tradition of being used to name threads specifically dedicated towards mobilising users to accomplish an offline/online activity.<sup>3</sup> Since these activities on /pol/ are political in nature, we see them as political actions – an organised effort to mobilise users towards accomplishing a specific political goal.

By setting the query filters to only list the opening post of threads with “operation” in their title (field: Subject; field: Only opening posts), in the before mentioned time frame, we obtained an initial yield of 10,950 threads. Since not all these threads dealt with political actions, but rather, various discussions on topics concerning literal operations (e.g., medical, military), it was necessary to go through them manually, and select only those which match the analysis’ need. By only leaving threads that start with a post that invites, encourages, and asks/pol/ users to develop and join in on a political action, we are left with 1,819 threads as a pool for the selection of relevant threads. These relevant threads usually start with a “mission statement”, an idea for a collective action with a specific goal in mind. We divided the threads by year, and randomly selected 3 threads per year with at least 150 posts - ending up with 7036 posts across 21 operation threads for analysis. This ensures ample discussion within each thread, as well as enough data for a thematic analysis. We analysed all posts from all threads, with individual posts being our unit of analysis. However, since posts vary in length from a single word or image to several paragraphs of text, we sometimes divided them into chunks of text with separate meanings and codes.

The procedure was as follows. Selected threads were captured as PDF files with NVivo 12 and imported into it. Both authors familiarised with the data, after which we did a thorough (re) reading, and, with our broad research questions in mind, we performed initial inductive coding within each thread. In the next step, each code was reviewed in detail by both researchers and, if needed, re-coded, merged with other codes, or removed from further analysis. The end product of this process was the generation of themes (Braun and Clarke 2019) which were finally refined and prepared for presentation in the article.

Before going into the study findings, it is important to note its ethical aspects. While planning our study we kept in mind various ethical issues when researching users’ digital content (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Franzke et al. 2019): the private/public nature of the data, participants’ consent, data anonymization, and dissemination of extremist, hate-filled content. Even though the private/public distinction is generally blurred on the internet (Ravn et al. 2020), we can assume that the 4chan community expects its content will be read by others (Bos et al. 2009; Convery and Cox 2012; Rodham and Gavin 2006). Nevertheless, even if we wanted to obtain /pol/ users’ consent, the strong 4chan emphasis on anonymity removes the issue of de-anonymization (Bos et al. 2009). This makes it impossible to identify participating individuals in /pol/ discussions, and for them to prove that they are the authors in question. Furthermore, acquiring consent in the context of studying online (far-right) groups that are prone to extremism opens the issue of researchers’ security, since extremist

ideology can be closely linked to violence (Fuchs 2018). Outside of user consent, our biggest ethical consideration was the presentation of the findings, which, due to the inclusion of hate speech, calls to violence, and extreme prejudices, can inadvertently spread extremist content (see Phillips 2018; Colley and Moore 2022). As that is not our intention, we use only the minimum number of quotations needed for our interpretation and blank out racial slurs and cusses, but otherwise reproduce full quotes to utilise the advantages of qualitative data analysis. Readers should expect to encounter offensive and hate speech in the next section.

## Findings

The focus of this research are political actions that were developed within /pol/. We are interested in the way political actions that were organised and the worldview expressed in the discussions on political actions. Using a thematic analysis, we identified 6 themes and 17 sub-themes (Table 1). Political actions on /pol/ were developed through discussion of both the action’s short-term goals, as well as /pol/’s broad long-term goals. Short-term goals varied a lot, but usually revolved around various forms of trolling the Left. Despite their variation, operations were also discussed from the point of view of their long-term goals, which were dominantly focused on “redpilling” the general public. Regarding methods, the discussions included directions (specific tactics) to undertake within a political action, content that would be used (usually memes), best ways to disseminate ideas, and user participation. Within the topic of worldview, we identify four themes - democracy and politics, within which anti-establishment ideas were discussed, relationships between corporations and the government, and Donald Trump; group perception and attitudes, within which we identify themes of feminists and sexual minorities, Jews, liberals and progressives, and other minorities; media and social networks, within which mainstream media as well as Reddit and Tumblr were discussed; and reflexive comments which focused on conspiracy theories and /pol/’s supposed role in society.

**Goals of political actions.** Within the theme of goals of their political actions, the discussions revolved around short and long-term goals. Specific short-term goals varied to a great extent. For example, one political action had the goal of removing Jews from /pol/ (“Operation Jew-infestation”); another had the goal of getting a woman, who stole a Trump campaign sign and posted it on social media, fired from her job (“Operation Jane Doe<sup>4</sup>”); one had the goal of creating public outrage by getting an athlete to burn the US flag (“Operation Spark”); “Operation Pork” had the goal of placing pork in the Halal sections of supermarkets, thereby forcing supermarkets to remove those sections altogether; “Operation G.A.Y.” had the goal of combining the visual imagery of the LGBT rainbow flag with exclusionist, or even Nazi, visual imagery. All specific goals shared a troll sentiment, in the sense that users were invited to “troll” outsiders, such as the media or progressive liberals, and entice reactions from them. This can be seen as a legacy of /b/ and Anonymous, where trolling was central to discussions and actions (McDonald 2015; Phillips 2015). At the same time, DeCook (2020) argues that “trolling has become a kind of political aesthetic and identity”; a central aspect of politics and culture (Merrin 2019). It allows proponents of extreme ideologies dissemination of their ideas, while at the same time offering them a way out when confronted about their beliefs – the idea that it was all “just a joke”.

In concordance with that, specific goals of the studied political actions were always embedded within a broader goal – the wider and long-term societal impacts of specific political actions. For

**Table 1 Themes and sub-themes regarding political actions and worldview from /pol/ Operations threads.**

Topic	Theme	Sub-theme	Short description	Number of references	
Political action	Goal	Specific goal (short-term)	Various goals that mobilise /pol/ users to create cognitive dissonance in their victims, troll communities, and stage publicity stunts in order to bait reactions	69	
		Broader goals (long-term)	Dominantly to “redpill the normies” by revealing the hypocrisy of the Left and of the establishment	39	
	Method	Direction of political action	No default tactic, open-ended and divisive discussions, whose directions include acquiring mass support through propaganda, strategic monetary donations, contacting authorities, doxxing, trolling, posting on social media etc.	503	
		Content	Collaborative creation and fine-tuning of unique memes for use in the action	762	
	Worldview	Democracy and politics	Propaganda - dissemination	Discussion on the best ways to exploit social media logic and users to increase dissemination and reach	203
			User Participation	Boasts and proof of participation, screenshots of victim reactions, alongside peer pressuring other users to join in	193
			Anti-establishment	Hatred and mistrust towards governments, which are seen as traitorous and deceitful. There are occasional calls for a violent revolution	34
			Corporations and government	Belief that corporations are corrupt, and that they aim to create corporate totalitarianism due to lack of care for public well-being and frequent funding of “anti-American agenda”	35
		Group perceptions and attitudes	Donald Trump	Conflict between being viewed as the only true anti-establishment politician who can change the system, and being viewed as a corrupt politician controlled by Jews	42
			Feminists and sexual minorities	Within threads, a negative attitude towards these groups was identified. They are presented as unreasonable and degenerate men haters, that are hypocritical in their support of women	20
Media and social networks		Jews	Considered to be the main enemies of /pol/. Extreme antisemitism is present as well as calls to violence toward Jews, which are portrayed as deceitful, subversive, and manipulative true rulers of states	208	
		Liberals and progressives	Viewed as a group of indoctrinated, stupid, intolerant, and aggressive hypocrites, bullies who force and shame others into accepting their ideals and values	83	
Reflexive comments on /pol/	Other minorities	Other minorities	Presence of extremely negative and violent opposition towards other minorities, as well as a strong rejection of immigration. There is a belief present that assimilation of these groups is impossible because it would lead to the destruction of society	200	
		Mainstream media	Viewed as being connected to the political establishment, manipulating and indoctrinating the public by forcing and setting the liberal agenda	60	
	The role in society	Reddit and Tumblr	Defined by their radically progressive values in /pol/’s view, due to which they work and stand against /pol/	28	
		Conspiracy theories	Presence of numerous global conspiracies, alongside the belief that /pol/ is filled with subversive users from “the outside”, who work to destabilise and prevent /pol/ users from organising and uniting	113	
			Perceive themselves as the only opponent to the Left, minorities, and Jews in cultural and racial wars; that /pol/ will win by “redpilling the normies”, and defeating existing dominant political narratives	109	

instance, one of the goals of “Operation No name” had users donate money to the “The Fine Young Capitalists” group, which aimed to empower women in the gaming industry. However, the broader goal of that political action was to use large donations and position within the group to discredit further criticism of /pol/ as being anti-feminist and against women in gaming. In another example, “Support Officer Wilson” had the specific goal of collecting money to support Darren Wilson, a Ferguson police officer who shot Michael Brown in 2015. However, the broader goal was to further create public outrage, especially among the liberal Left (“social justice warriors” (SJWs)), when the amount of Wilson’s donations would surpass Brown’s. In “Subversion General”, the goal was to use memes to bring to the broader public’s attention the supposed inconsistencies between various social groups (such as Muslims, feminists, Black Lives Matter etc.), and the Democratic Party. Ultimately, this would confuse the Democratic Party supporters on the party’s positions, and lead to its dissolution, and pacification of the USA’s Left.

*uh it doesnt matter, this is about making n\*\*\*\*\* and feminists mad* (Operation Support Officer Wilson, 2014)

*Our goal should be that liberals would not be able to tell between their own party fringe and our trolling.* (Operation Subversion, 2016)

*>There is no deprogramming or reasoning with them; It’s not about influencing the lost ones, but to save those who are being converted by k\*\*\* propaganda right now and still have a chance to resist.* (Operation Sponsored By, 2020)

While there were negative sentiments regarding political actions themselves within threads, the discussion surrounding both the short and long-term goals was lacking, revolving usually around the expected societal impact of the campaign. Furthermore, once both goals were decided, later posts rarely related to the goal, focusing more on specific steps – the method. As was mentioned, while specific goals vary, broader goals largely focused on showing the supposed hypocrisy of the Left (identified as either liberals, SJWs, or democrats), which uses double standards when dealing with in-group and out-groups; or were aimed at showing the supposed unequal and unmerited social treatment of minorities compared to the majority of the (white) US population. By combining these two goals, these political actions aimed to “redpill the normies”; to relativize the extreme right ideology and confuse the general population regarding liberal ideology and political stances of the Democratic Party. This is in line with previous studies analysing the broader alt-right actions and stances, both within and outside /pol/ (e.g., Nagle 2017; Woods and Hahner 2019; Stern 2019). Furthermore, it shows that short-term goals of the analysed operations were not mere trolling for the sake of trolling. Instead, by generating confusion in the public, which is a natural by-product of trolling (DeCook 2020), users would be able to potentially spread their specific worldview. We turn to this in the later part of the article.

**Methods of political actions—direction.** For now, let us turn to the methods of these political actions, which are the theme of the largest number of analysed posts (over 50%). We identify four topics. First, usually after the goal has been solidified, the discussion ensued about the specific direction (tactics) that the action should take to best fulfil its goal. For example, in an effort to remove Jews from 4chan, discussion ensued about whether it is better to call out Jews regarding Israel’s actions against Palestine (by using the Holocaust frame), or simply to not engage in any discussion with those they identified as Jewish. In “Operation

Spotlight”, which had the goal of stopping the signing of the Transatlantic trade partnership, the discussion revolved around the best way to achieve this. While some posts argued for contacting their political representatives, others were prone to protests and “taking it to the streets”.

*Like OP says, guys. We will show the jew that their tactics are worthless. Once identified, point them out, and just post around* (Operation Jew-Infestation, 2014)

*Crying about something on the internet instead of taking up a rifle and handling business alone. Nothing changes without blood shed. Keep thinking working with reddit and youtube will do you any good* (Operation Spotlight, 2015)

A discussion on timing of the political action ensued in the “Subversion General” thread, where some posts stated that the goal of pointing out inconsistencies between the Democratic Party and various minority groups should be a continuous effort, while other posts pointed toward specific political events, such as midterms or other elections.

*photoshopf\*g/lurker and we’re gonna need people to take responsibility and keep these threads up so that we have a prolonged lasting effect* (Operation Subversion, 2016)

We find that there is no default tactic that is employed for various “operations”. Compared to the discussion on the actual goals, discussions regarding tactics and specific milestones were more diverse, with posts pointing to (relatively) disjoint ideas about desirable forms of political behaviour. The discussions seem to have been thoughtful of formal political procedures and the mainstream media impact on the majority of the US population (so-called normies). For example, the discussions revolved around how the mainstream media viewed 4chan and /pol/ users as being hateful, antisemitic, far-right etc.<sup>5</sup>, after which it moved toward planning the next steps of political actions once the mainstream media would identify /pol/ as the originator of those actions. For example, in “Operation Black Privilege”, it was noted that the engaged users must consider /pol/’s media and public reputation when creating content for the operation, as the operation’s messages and content can be easily brushed aside, should they play into the established perception.

*DO NOT BE RACIST OR USE SLURS IN PICS, LETS MAKE SJWS COME UP WITH A REAL RESPONSE OTHER THAN HURR DURR 4CHAN BE RAYCISS* (Operation Black Privilege, 2015)

**Methods of political actions—content.** Regarding content of political actions, the discussion usually revolved around very specific questions regarding memes. This includes ideas about which font to use on what photograph, what is the best hashtag for social media, which symbols to use etc. This process was often chaotic, with multiple posts simultaneously being written about new design ideas and new content, while containing criticism of other content and ideas, as well as providing suggestions for improving them. It essentially led to a swift evolution of a particular meme, as it quickly went through different iterations of designs and variations, up until the agreement of a singular direction.

*The font in pic related sucks ass, granted, but maybe another anon can improve on it.* (Operation Sponsored By, 2020)

Regardless of specific goals of actions, it seems that the underlying criterion for producing content was the amount of shock, anger, or repulsion it would incite within the public, or

specifically with the Left. Usually, the goal was to provoke the Left and manipulate the public beyond their awareness. This sometimes involved explicit lies and fake news, but mostly it was focused on framing new messages or re-framing existent messages. For example, in “Operation Jew-infestation”, a large number of posts focused on the way an online “poster” identifying a Jewish discussion contributor would look like, from the use of a David’s star, to font size and picture background. In “Operation Sponsored by”, which had the goal of discursively connecting aggressive rioting during the #BLM protests with the brands that support the #BLM movement, created memes were mostly juxtapositions of looting/violence photos with brand logos and quotes of their support for #BLM, amount of money donated, or their tagline (e.g., McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” written over a photo of a burning store). The discussion also revolved around fake advertising as a way of using humour to ease the acceptance of the connection between the brands and the riots. These posts included comments on the text that would be used on all memes, the amount of text on the memes, as well as the actual text, quality of the Photoshop work, fonts etc. Due to quickly establishing consent on the content design, discussion ensued on its diversity, combining various images with brand names, logos, and quotes, which were then promptly rated and commented on.

*Looking good, text on the bottom could be a little bigger, maybe all of it could be a little bigger. (Operation Jew-Infestation, 2014)*

*The phrasing “Sponsored by” Is for the most part an abstraction for much of the masses. Wouldn’t phrasing like “brought to you by” have a greater psychological impact on the left end of the bell? The branding is already imprinted and entrenched, whether they know it or not. The bridging thought would seem to me to be key in this being effective. Then again, there may be greater merit in utilizing ONLY brands linked with images (Operation Sponsored By, 2020)*

Content wise, the most noted method was creating and spreading viral content - usually memes - through mainstream social media networks. Across all operations, great thought was placed into developing memes, discussing their potential public impact, and their spreadability. We identify awareness of the low involvement-high impact combination of memes, and throughout the analysed actions discussions focused on the political memes’ ability to discursively frame political issues, actors, social groups etc., in a way which benefits /pol/’s goals. Notably, we detect no entry barriers nor gatekeeping practices for content creation, as any /pol/ user interested enough to participate in the thread could have started making memes and posting them for other users. This responds to prior research, which points out the persuasive, grassroots, and expressive aspects of memes (Shifman 2014), their powerful persuasive and expressive effect (Merrin 2019), especially for discursive framing (Al Zidjaly 2017), as well as their ability to promote in-group solidarity, attract new members, and strengthen existing group beliefs (Tuters and Hagen 2019). More importantly, these findings go hand in hand with Woods and Hahner’s (2019, p. 5) conclusion that “memes are not simply one tactic for the Alt-right—they are the primary rhetorical mechanism grounding its broader work and linking outsiders to its radical views”. This fact is clearest when we take into consideration the ambiguous space between irony and sincerity, and between being jokes and promoting far-right values that observed memes inhabit (Milner 2018; Woods and Hahner 2019). While the operations’ organisational discourse contained elements of play, the ultimate political goals were undoubtedly serious, since these practical actions were clearly

intended to be carried out in the ‘real world’ and had tangible effects.

Despite being made by individuals, memes made in these threads were always a collective endeavour - they “exist beyond individual signature or citation; they’re collectively created, circulated, and transformed by those who can engage with them.” (Milner 2018, p. 218). Their inherent uncertainty and modularity make them into a conduit for the collective’s (in this case, the engaged /pol/ users) values and desired interpretations of the world and events. As such, the memes we encountered are defined by far-right characteristics, such as racism, white identity/nationalism, criticism of mainstream conservatives, anti-liberalism, and anti-Christianity, to name a few (Hawley 2019). In addition to this, these memes often take symbols of mainstream cultural phenomena (such as LGBT flags and rainbows), and appropriate them to far-right values, which is a common practice for extreme groups (Lee 2020). More specifically, the meme creation process enabled the recontextualisation of both existing community memes and the political events through political, socio-cultural ideology, and narratives of their community, offering what Stall et al. (2022, p. 5) define as a “referential infrastructure that connects psychological space of these organisations to mainstream cultural events”. Based on our findings, we agree with their assessment that content created in this way enabled further socialisation of community members, concretisation of group narratives, bonding of a part of /pol/ community with the mainstream (through meme spreading on the internet), while also inviting and motivating other /pol/ users to get involved in such political activities in the future.

**Methods of political actions—dissemination.** Regarding dissemination, the main discussion revolved around the best way to spread ideas outside of 4chan, i.e., to fulfil the goals of a given operation. Usually that means discussing the online culture and processes on Reddit, X, Tumblr, and Facebook, as well as mainstream media, to adapt the messages and the dissemination processes to a particular medium. Among other things, this includes tagging famous people, spamming through troll accounts or fake “leftist” accounts, and using subreddits to “cover their trail”. Importantly, there was an awareness of the need to invest time and energy in creating a believable online persona, if the intended subversion of the operation is to be successful. Various tips were put forward - from having “groomed” a couple of accounts, to choosing a specific profile picture, not following too many people at once, buying followers etc.

*Tumblr and FB are better targets. FB might catch on a little quicker but this shit will spread like wildfire on tumblr (Operation Subversion, 2016)*

*They are fake accounts, constructed to seem legit and established. Even leftists won’t fall for some obvious troll account made 45 min ago (Operation Spark, 2017)*

*Twitter is a good place for that. It helps if you have multiple accounts that have been “aged” like fine wine. To do this right you should have multiple accounts with multiple personalities. One black, one jew, one feminist, one gay.. (Operation Spark, 2017)*

Furthermore, the discussion ensued on the probable public impact that the created memes and messages could provoke, and a part of the discussions focused on the next steps: how to prepare a response for the public response on the first wave of content. As previously discussed, the end goal was “redpilling the normies”, who can be easily influenced.

*It goes this way: -"I love X" -"X IS SHIT, YOU F\*\*\*ING JEW" -"Hey shut up you anti-semite f\*ck, X is the best thing and im very superior for liking it" -"No its not " + irrefutable proof -They block you -You start receiving favs and followers like crazy.; You can be less aggressive if you want, but the aggressiveness is what makes them respond, which is what makes you win attention. If you even let them twit 1 or 2 times about "This stupid ppl saying anti-semite stuff about me, how can ppl be so stupid, omg!" that's better, as more people will be looking for what you said in the first place (Operation Spotlight, 2015)*

Finally, a frequent discussion revolved around the engagement of /pol/ users in political action. This usually includes posts regarding the willingness to contribute or specific action that was undertaken. For example, posts mentioned free time, resources, and skills to fulfil a task, or included bragging about having donated money, created a social media account, shared a meme etc. It is interesting to note that peer pressure to act was present, with posts regularly questioning users about their participation, asking for proof in form of screenshots or photos, and generally motivating others to participate in the activities.

Considering the discussion on the dissemination of created content, we can identify a deep understanding and knowledge of internet technology, its culture, and flows of information, all the while being entrenched and embedded in the digital sphere. One constant through all operations was the belief that online activities are crucial for contemporary politics, and the best way to bring about societal change by influencing the public. This is evident in the subversive usage of fake accounts and revolt-inducing content, as well as in operations being aimed at the exploitation of the existing digital infrastructure and communication channels, online participation of the Left, and consequently the attitudes and worldviews of "the normies" (Nagle 2017; Woods and Hahner 2019), in order to further /pol/'s own political agenda and goals.

Notably, the discussion placed great emphasis on the public's understanding and reaction to the disseminated content, accounting both the public and media's expected reaction, given 4chan's common reputation. However, instead of only considering how content will be perceived when shared by themselves, posts also emphasised the importance of having unassuming, unaware internet users share the same content, so as to obfuscate the fact that the content has an orchestrated political agenda. There was an understanding that all of the operations count on other users of social media platforms to spread this content on their own, upon getting into contact with the initial dissemination from within /pol/. By reaching users who are not familiar with the operation, and turning them into unaware disseminators, the operations aimed to increase the legitimacy, importance, and influence of the content, as it would become harder to determine who is its source and debunk it. In the dissemination strategy, the discussion also focused on hiding the origin of the created content which would help to engineer "a grassroot movement", where random users would come together through their own dissemination of said content.

These findings deepen our understanding of well-known /pol/ hoaxes and actions, whose internet visibility managed to bring obscure, fringe political topics to the public, by manipulating mainstream internet users and media outlets into becoming unknowing disseminators of extremist thought. An example is the "Hillary is severely ill" hoax, where Hillary Clinton's near fainting was turned into memes, flooding social media with photoshopped images of a sickly and unwell Clinton, and making their hashtag trend, which was then picked up and discussed by mainstream media outlets (Donovan et al. 2022). Notably, this corresponds to

the findings of the Oxygen of Amplification report, which highlights how journalists can become amplifiers of extremist thought (Phillips 2018). Additionally, the detected desire to hide the origin of the operation, usually by creating fake social media accounts, is present in the #EndFathersDay hoax, in which /pol/ users masqueraded as feminist Twitter users to create the illusion of a rising grassroot movement that demanded the cancellation of Fathers' Day. It would eventually be picked up by Fox News, which aired a news piece attacking these "feminists" (Marcotte 2014), having been successfully fooled by /pol/ users into believing that the movement was organic.

**Underlying worldview of political actions.** The second goal of this study is to examine the underlying worldview within which the analysed political actions were discussed. We identify four broad themes – democracy and politics, group perceptions and attitudes, media and social networks, and /pol/ characteristics. As we delved deeper into subthemes that were present, we identified an overarching narrative of the world. The discussion was focused on (Western) liberal democracies. While liberal democracy has for a long time been the dominant political regime that centred around the idea of personal freedom, equality, and other democratic principles, the analysed discussions pointed out that it is now facing deterioration in international relevance, political stability, western ideals, and cultural unity. The proposed political actions work towards redpilling unaware members of society, and even /pol/ members, in an effort to "save the Western world as they know it". We identify strong anti-establishment attitudes, which includes extreme dissatisfaction with current political elites, regardless of their party affiliation. Politicians were perceived as using liberal democracy as a façade to hide their selfishness and corruptness, thereby not giving the power to the people.

*They are not patriots, they are not Catholics, they are defending their interests and only their interests, like most boomers. Every other things they are saying is just a way to sugar-coat it (Operation Total Meme War, 2017)*

In addition to being corrupted, the political elites were also perceived as working closely with corporations, who have enormous social and political influence, which they use to bring about "corporate totalitarianism", actively sacrificing existing values, culture, and rights in pursuit of short-term profit.

*Are you ready for corporations to control laws by suing your country whenever the two don't agree and taking money from the public for the f\*ck up? Are you ready to never go forward in progress because some company gets butthurt that any law could MAYBE hurt their profits? (Operation Spotlight, 2015)*

Furthermore, the mainstream media and social networks are used by the political and economic elites in order to shape how members of a society perceive the world and their place in it. By becoming trapped in these carefully planned narratives, people become ignorant of the truth, and anyone daring enough to question the narrative, let alone act against it, is punished by being publicly shamed.

*F\*ck the corrupt media. It's them who convinced the public to put morons into power (Operation Support Officer Wilson, 2014)*

*Always remember: what the left aims to do, above all, is to demoralize people, to make them feel ashamed and isolated for disagreeing with them (Operation Paper Towel, 2020)*



Within the identified worldview the Left was perceived as having the goal of punishing the white race, especially white conservative Christian men. In this fight, the Left shows its hypocrisy; liberals, progressives and SJWs proclaim that they are fighting for freedom and human rights, but they only focus on negative behaviours of their enemies, while disregarding, or finding excuses, for similar behaviours of liberals or minorities. They were viewed as not being purposely evil, but irrational, even brainwashed – “immune” to facts, disregarding source-based information. Therefore, there is no point in trying to communicate with them.

*Reasoning with a leftist is impossible. If they've been brainwashed into the social justice cult, they have a canned response to deflect everything you say. They reject arguments based on the identity of the individuals making them, rather than on their merits. If you're a straight white male, the conversation is over before it's even begun* (Operation Subversion, 2016)

Similarly, feminists were portrayed as “feminazis”, a hypocritical group that only supposedly cares about women and women’s rights. They were perceived to generally be university educated young women, too much focused on political correctness, and who have been indoctrinated into hating men and the Western civilization. As such, they mostly deal with “made-up” sexual violence, with the goal of the destruction of white heterosexual men.

*they won't care, the purpose of the whole 'rape culture' thing is falsely accusing white men* (Operation #RememberRotherham, 2015)

However, the biggest enemies in the discussions were Jews, Muslim immigrants, and black people. Jews were portrayed similarly as in Nazi propaganda – scheming, rich capitalists, parasites, rats, disease-ridden beings, devils that manipulate societies and control the media (Confino 2014). An extremely strong anti-semitic sentiment was present, with numerous calls to violence toward them.

*IT'S ALWAYS THE JEWS, WTF!!* (Operation Jane Doe, 2016)

Muslim immigrants were portrayed negatively through multiple stereotypes and slurs. More generally, Islam was viewed as a violent religion, and as such, it is completely incompatible with democracy and other Western values. Since they have higher birth rates, they will dominate the Western population and slowly destroy Western culture.

*Muslims are like a swarm of hornets. Yes, they're dangerous and violent and I wouldn't want them near me, but if someone breaks your window and throws nest after nest of hornets into your living room, it would be better to stop the guy throwing the hornets in before trying to chase down each individual hornet. Once the guy is gone, then you can remove the hornets* (Operation Jew-Infestation, 2014)

*Muslims and jews deserve the same oven* (Operation Pork, 2018)

Attitudes toward black people were even more severe – they were viewed as a violent, illogical, confrontational, angry mob; often compared to animals. Additionally, the belief was present that they are actively supported by Jews, in order to destabilise and weaken the West.

*Blacks are not humans. So, you can't really say they are "someone"* (Operation Support Officer Wilson, 2014)

However, there was a hope for change through a violent revolution, and by winning cultural and racial wars happening around the world, most strongly in the US. The methods used in this revolution were often debated and discussed, but all accounts agreed that acceleration of socio-economic, racial, and cultural conflicts in the West would bring about a destructive revolution, where the previously silent (white) majority would rise and destroy the current society, to create a “better society that will rise through its ashes”.

Within mainstream politics, actors such as Donald Trump were viewed as the only ones who can bring about a change of the global political landscape, as they are free from the influence of both the mainstream media and the Jews. This fact makes them immune to the pushed narratives and contexts of the global elites and grants them the ability to push their counter-narratives onto the people. Still, dissonant voices were present, seeing Trump as yet another Jew-controlled politician, who tricked /pol/ into supporting him.

*i think most non-lobotomized americans realize by now that trump represents anti-establishment, while gope/hillary represents the anti-american "establishment"* (Operation Blacklist, 2016)

The role of political actions was, among other things, to “redpill the normies” – getting the average citizens to support /pol/’s cause by changing their worldview and “educating” them through subversive political actions. This would also prepare them for the day when the prophesied revolution finally begins, so as to create a society rid of progressive liberals, Jews, black people, Muslims etc., defined by personal freedom, free speech, and value-free facts.

*This has NOTHING to do with partisan politics and EVERYTHING to do with taking back our infinite power (which is both collective AND individual) so that we can use that infinite power of ours righteously and responsibly, you dipshit* (Operation Frog in The White House, 2019)

The observed /pol/’s actions are entrenched within a non-democratic, anti-government, anti-liberal, and anti-pluralist worldview, filled with extremely negative, and usually violent, attitudes toward minorities. The identified themes point to a perception of a declining Western liberal world, caught in a broad cultural and racial war, within which /pol/ is changing the average citizen’s worldview. This would ultimately create a society dedicated to white people, a white ethno-state that is a “homogenous, pristine, orderly, and eugenically engineered utopia.” (Stern 2019, p. 13). This is in line with previous studies, which point to the regular presence of anti-semitic and racial discourse on /pol/ (Zannettou et al. 2020; Tuters and Hagen 2019; Papisavva et al. 2020).

However, on a wider scale, these ideas, values, and worldviews found within discussions on political actions are not unique to 4chan. Rather, they are clear indicators of the presence of contemporary far-right ideology and identity, based on white nationalist, conspiratorial thinking (Stern 2019; Mudde 2019; Miller-Idriss 2020; Finchelstein 2022), and a worldview similar to Stanley’s (2018) understanding of fascist politics and ideas. Despite being defined by a myriad of ideological features, such as antisemitism, racism, sexism, nativism, and authoritarianism, the most important aspect of this identity is its opposition and defiance to the contemporary liberal and democratic socio-political order, as it attempts to undermine its key features (Miller-Idriss 2020). For instance, its open and unquestionable belief that other races are inferior to white population and that they cannot be assimilated in any way, stands in direct opposition to the liberal notion of tolerance, inclusion, and acceptance

(Mondor and Winters 2020). This is in line with the portrayal of /pol/ as a weird collectivity, i.e., a group whose identity is primarily formed through its juxtaposition to antagonistic outgroups (Hagen and Tutters 2021). Under the identified far-right worldview, white populations are facing an existential threat from a demographic change which would replace Western civilization and values with Islamic ones. This would ultimately lead to a “white genocide”. Such is the magnitude of this problem, that the only solution for the far-right is to accelerate societal polarisation and discord, which would cause a colossal race war. Following the end of this war a new world order would be born, one in which white civilization is restored. Therefore, each act of discord is celebrated and revered, as it brings the far-right closer to the collapse of society as we know it (Miller-Idriss 2020).

## Conclusion

The goal of this article was to analyse online political actions with intended real-world effects that were developed on 4chan’s /pol/ board. By using a thematic analysis, we gave a detailed insight into the organisational practices of these actions, their “weapons of choice”, and their underlying, far-right, worldview. We showed how a collective of anonymous users developed organisational practices and produced and disseminated various content with far-right goals. Thus, we contribute to both literature on /pol/, by shining a light on the discussions and development of content that was identified and explored in previous studies; and to literature on collective political action, by investigating non-hierarchical, bottom-up, online collective actions, and exploring the organisational practices of (relatively) fringe communities. We showed how the analysed actions had various, seemingly unconnected specific, short-term goals, but nonetheless coherently worked toward the same broad long-term goals, i.e., to “redpill” the general population and expose the alleged hypocrisy of the liberal left. By far the deepest discussion surrounded the methods of the analysed political actions. Specifically, how to develop online content, mostly memes, and how to disseminate it to the mainstream internet and media. These discussions were deeply embedded within digital technology and internet culture, both regarding the tactics and dissemination of the content, as well as the perception that online political action is key for bringing about societal and political change. Therefore, we bring additional credence to Phillips’ (2018) insights, as our results also show that these users organise their political activities by taking into consideration the logic of news media, and the ways in which communication on digital spaces operates. By strategically taking advantage of individuals and the media, these far-right messages achieve greater visibility, despite the relatively low number of fringe community users that are involved in their creation and dissemination. As such, it can be said that /pol/’s organisational practices go against the very nature of contemporary news media, because by reporting about far-right content, one plays into the far-right agenda, becoming another link in the amplification process.

The identified organisational practices work as a way to develop a collective identity, one with a clear underlying worldview, and the collective’s position and role in the world. This relationship between collective behaviour and identity seems to be even more important in /pol/’s context of (almost) complete user anonymity and content ephemerality, since it cannot rely on personalised content and exchanges (as is the case for connective actions on other platforms). Similar insights were found in previous studies on Anonymous (Wiedemann 2014; Uitermark 2020). However, the collective identity and its foundational values were not only implicitly defined through discussions on the particularities of a collective political action; they were also explicitly discussed. We recognized an underlying worldview behind these political actions and identified themes that fit within

far-right ideology and white nationalism, which included extremely negative and violent attitudes toward various minorities, as well as a perception of a declining Western liberal world, whose salvation lies, at least partly, in the fulfilment of the analysed political actions. Still, it is important to note that these political actions did not merely serve the cause of developing collective identity or venting frustrations of a fringe online community. They also had (potential) effects on the real, offline, world, such as getting a person fired, collecting money for a person facing criminal charges, influencing undecided voters, stopping the signing of a bilateral agreement, etc. As such, they represent a possibility for the far-right to directly impact the world outside the relatively small internet corner where these actions are developed.

Finally, we turn to several caveats of this study. First of all, we focused our analysis on threads that had the term “operation” in the title or the opening post. Regardless of the term’s established meaning within 4chan culture, it is possible that there are various other political actions that were not included in our analysis. In addition, we only analysed a part of all the threads that had the term “operation” in the title or the opening post, leaving most of the threads out of our analysis. This also means that our results should not be seen as representing /pol/ as a community, but only a subset of /pol/ threads that focused on political actions. Second, almost half of the posts in our sample were categorised as filler - comments related neither to the development of the ongoing political action nor their worldview. Examples include random memes, gif reactions, pornographic content, or incoherent comments. This means that there is a possibility that within these seemingly filler posts there are important communication practices that we missed. Thirdly, even though posts included explicit discussions that we categorised in the topic of worldview, they were brought about by users discussing political actions. Thus, because we drew conclusions about worldview from (discussions on) practice, it is possible that the identified worldview lacks nuance. Finally, future studies could focus on more political actions discussed within /pol/, including the analysis of why some ideas stimulate discussion and participation while others do not, and a longitudinal perspective to capture in greater detail the changes of political actions within /pol/ through time; as well as analyse political actions of /pol/’s leftist counterpart, i.e., “Lefty-pol”, to see the differences and similarities of organisational practices and ideas between them.

## Data availability

The dataset analysed during the current study are available in the Open Science Framework repository, [https://osf.io/ue7r5/?view\\_only=d86ff4def0f8450889826b1d056b6a90](https://osf.io/ue7r5/?view_only=d86ff4def0f8450889826b1d056b6a90).

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## Notes

- 1 However, there is an abundance of studies that point out the critical role of algorithms and other technical and commercial aspects of social networking sites that impact, beneficially and/or detrimentally, online political action (e.g. Milan 2015a; 2015b; Poell and Van Dijck 2015; Coretti and Pica 2019; Albu and Etter 2020).
- 2 Currently, within global rules on 4chan, calls for raiding (both outside and within 4chan) are not allowed - <https://www.4chan.org/rules>.
- 3 The earliest case of the use of the term operation for such events on 4chan goes back to May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008, with Operation Jewtube (Bibanon.org 2023). User curated histories of 4chan note that, ever since Project Chanology in 2008, “...all raids, now called Operations, were about ensuring freedom and righting perceived wrongs.” (Wikibooks.org 2023). Furthermore, there have been news reports of various

- discovered /pol/ political activities ever since 2010, and all were referred to as operations (Brown 2010; Doherty 2020; Fagan 2021; Sung 2019).
- 4 To respect this person's privacy, as well as to not perpetuate the goal of this campaign by further spreading her name, we renamed this operation as Jane Doe.
- 5 For an example on how the media sees 4chan, and their activities, see the news article by Wendling (2017).

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### Author contributions

These authors contributed equally to this work.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. Instead, it used publicly available data and as such was exempt from requiring ethical approval. Still, as was mentioned in the Methodology section, while planning and carrying out this study we kept in mind various ethical issues regarding digital content. Regarding the dignity and anonymity of /pol/ users, we can assume that they expect that their content will be read by others (the data is publicly available). On the other hand, the strong emphasis on anonymity within /pol/ removes the issue of de-anonymization of users. Therefore, it is impossible to identify the /pol/ users that participated in discussions that were analysed in this study.

### Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. All data that was used in this study is publicly available and also by its nature anonymous. Furthermore, due to /pol/'s strong emphasis on user anonymity, it is impossible to de-anonymize /pol/ users.

### Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Kosta Bovan.

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