Whitney Phillips
English PhD Candidate, University of Oregon

Abstract:
This article focuses on 4chan's /b/ board, a—if not *the*—pillar of online trolling activity. In addition to chronicling the history of the site, as well as the emergence of the nebulous collective known as Anonymous, the article considers the ways in which early media representations of and subsequent reactions to trolling behaviors on /b/ helped create and sustain an increasingly influential subculture. Echoing Stanley Cohen's analysis of moral panics, the article goes on to postulate that trolls and mainstream media outlets, specifically Fox News, are locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicted upon spectacle; each camp amplifies and builds upon the other's reactions, thus entering into an unintended but highly synergistic congress.

# The House That Fox Built:

## Anonymous, Spectacle and Cycles of Amplification

(to be published in peer-reviewed journal Television and New Media)

### Harmless Monsters

In her profile of 4chan's infamous /b/ board, one of the Internet's most active trolling hotspots, Fox News reporter Taryn Sauthoff walks a very fine line. "Some see 4chan as a site filled with bored teenagers who like to push the limits on what they can do online," she writes. "Others see users as part of an 'Internet Hate Machine' filled with calls for domestic terrorists to bomb stadiums" (2009). As evidence of the latter claim, Sauthoff cites the board's highly transgressive content and user-base, whom Sauthoof describes as antisocial and foul-mouthed. In support of the claim that 4chan users are little more than bored teenagers, Sauthoff plays up users' social isolation, and marvels at their love of cute pictures of cats.

Using Fox News' well-publicized "some people say" rhetorical technique, in which a reporter editorializes by proxy ("Outfoxed" 2008), Sauthoff thus manages to frame /b/ as a "surreptitious cultural powerhouse" populated by powerful misanthropes and an insignificant, "largely unknown" website filled with harmless, cat-loving computer geeks, a position she echoes in her profile of moot, 4chan's founder, whom she describes in turn as wily king of the Internet's underworld and hapless college dropout who lives with his mother (2009).

Sauthoff's take on 4chan is hardly unique. The vast majority of mainstream media accounts of 4chan, particularly the /b/board, simultaneously portray users as both threatening and pathetic. By maximizing audience antipathy—i.e. attacking whatever undesirable element from all possible angles, in Sauthoff's case, users' viciousness and implied effeminacy—the perceived (sub)cultural threat of 4chan is minimized, echoing Dick Hebdige's account of ideological incorporation (1979). Indeed, in their hostility towards and dismissal of 4chan, best summarized by the seemingly counterintuitive statement that 4chan is nothing to worry about and should be destroyed immediately, mainstream media outlets aim to neutralize a particularly counter-hegemonic cultural space—an argument complicated and ironized by the role the media has played in 4chan's ascendency.

The following paper explores this connection, and posits a much closer relationship between trolls and the mainstream media than either group might care to acknowledge. First, I discuss 4chan itself, particularly its /b/ or "random" board. In addition to profiling its resident trolls, I historicize the emergence of Anonymous as its hive-minded figurehead. I then consider how media outlets, specifically Fox News, inadvertently engendered and sustained the very aberration they sought to contain, and provided scaffolding upon which further subcultural content could be layered. Finally, I consider the similarities between trolls and the outlets that feed them. As I will argue, trolling behaviors are homologous to mainstream media output, not diametrically opposed to; the motivations of each group might diverge, but their respective rhetorical strategies are often indistinguishable.

## Trailing the Hivemind

As numerous scholars (boyd 2009; Ito 1997; Nakamura 2002, 2007; Schaap 2002) have stressed, so-called real life necessarily bleeds into online life, and vice versa. Our raced, classed and gendered bodies are encoded into our online behaviors, even when we're pretending to be something above or beyond or below what we really are (Nakamura *et al.* 2000). In short, we cannot ignore the terrestrial when talking about the virtual.

In the context of trolling, we cannot overlook the ways in which trolls' raced, classed and gendered bodies undergird and provide context for trolling behaviors. This is not to say that there exists a simple one-to-one relationship between the people behind the trolls and their trolling personas. But at a very basic level, trolls' terrestrial experiences—levels of education, access to media and technology, political affiliation or lack thereof—influence their online choices, including (and most basically) the ability to go online at all.

That said, precise demographics are impossible to verify, particularly on 4chan/b/. Trolls on /b/ rarely if ever reveal identifying information, and are quick to shame or punish those who do, a fact that poses a number of practical ethnographic complications. It is impossible to know with any degree of certainty whether or not an anonymous troll (variously described on 4chan as anons or /b/tards) would ever receive a specific message, if the respondent was in fact the intended troll, or if the troll was trolling in his or her answers, a point Gabriella Coleman addresses in her examination of cunning within trolling and hacking spaces (2011).

In this way, research within the trollspace necessarily—though at times uncomfortably—echoes Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), which eschews discussion of terrestrial identity in favor of close anthropological examination of one's online identity. As danah boyd notes, Boellstorff's analysis implicitly acknowledges the significance of the "real" self yet refuses to consider the ways in which one self informs and complicates the other; this, boyd argues, is highly problematic, and provides a limited account of a given set of behaviors (2008).

I fully concede this point, and therefore am in full agreement with boyd. Consequently I have confined my research focus to what trolls do, and more importantly, how their behaviors fit within and emerge alongside dominant ideologies. Specifically, and drawing from over two thousand hours of participant observation on /b/, *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, *Know Your Meme* and *YouTube*, the following analysis chronicles the subcultural origins of trolling behaviors, and examines the ways in which these behaviors emerged from and evolved in ways structured by corporate media logic.

## The Internet Hate Machine

4chan.org, a simple imageboard modeled after Japan's wildly successful Futaba Channel, was founded in 2003 by then-15 year-old Christopher "moot" Poole. Currently the site houses dozens of content-specific boards, all of which cater to a particular subset of the

4chan population. The /a/ board, for example, is devoted to anime, the /x/ board to paranormal phenomena, the /v/ board to video games, and so on.

The most popular board on 4chan—and the board to which I have restricted my focus—is /b/, the "random" board, which generates the bulk of 4chan's traffic. Populated by tens of thousands of self-identifying trolls, users who revel in transgression and disruptiveness, /b/ is widely regarded as an epicenter (arguably *the* epicenter) of online trolling activity, and consistently pumps out some of the Internet's most recognizable, not to mention offensive, viral content. As Matthias Schwartz explains in his 2008 profile of the site, "Measured in terms of depravity, insularity and traffic-driven turnover, the culture of /b/ has little precedent…[it] reads like the inside of a high-school bathroom stall, or an obscene telephone party line, or a blog with no posts and all comments filled with slang that you are too old to understand" (Schwartz 2008).

Schwartz' association of /b/ with X-rated latrinalia is particularly fitting, as content—much like its bathroom-stall equivalent—is almost always posted anonymously. Although users are given the option to populate the [Name] field, very few do, and even fewer provide identifying details (that is to say, actual names or names the poster intends to use more than once). As a result, the vast majority of content is created anonymously and modified anonymously and downloaded, re-modified and attributed anonymously. Users are thus known as "anon," and the collective "Anonymous."

As previously discussed, this arrangement poses a number of demographic hurdles. Anons who identify as male could actually be female; anons who identify as female could actually be transgender; teenaged anons could say they are 35 and twenty-somethings could claim to be underage. There is no way to empirically verify exactly who is posting exactly what. It is however possible to identify a number of basic demographic indicators.

First, almost all threads on /b/ are written in English and engage American culture and politics, with the exception of various appropriated Japanese references (i.e. Japanese-produced cartoons such as Pokemon and DragonBallZ, as well as a number of popular anime, including Azumanga Daioh and Gurren Lagann). Occasionally other languages and nationalities are represented, but the overwhelming percentage of anons identify as middle class sub/urban Americans.

Secondly, it is likely that most posters fall somewhere between 18 and 30, an assumption based on the proliferation of late 80s and early 90s pop cultural references, including a flood of “you nostalgia, you lose” threads in which posters wax nostalgic over shared childhood memories. Although attachment to a certain vintage of TV, movies and toys doesn’t *guarantee* a particular age range, it does suggest a preoccupation with a particular moment in American pop-cultural history, a significant detail in itself.

In addition to suggesting a particular age range and nationality, trolling behaviors on /b/ are strongly indicative of whiteness. Most obviously, trolling humor is frequently directed at people of color, particularly African Americans. Even when engaging in racially neutral humor, anons take their own whiteness, and the whiteness of their audience, for granted; on the rare occasion that an anon comes forward as non-white, he or she must self-identify, that is, flag him or herself as racially Other.

Finally, although it is not possible to prove definitively that all /b/tards are biologically male, the ethos of /b/ is unquestionably androcentric. In addition to reveling in sexist tropes (“get back in the kitchen and make me a sammich”) and deriding posters who come forward as female (the standard response being “tits or gtfo”), /b/ is home to a seemingly endless supply of pornographic material, all of which is filtered through an explicitly male gaze. But not necessarily a heterosexual male gaze; a large percentage of porn on /b/ is gay, and trolls devote a great deal of energy to ostensibly homosocial (if not outright homosexual) behavior, including frequent “rate my cawk” threads, in which anons post and rate pictures of each other’s penises.

The prevalence of the word “fag” further complicates this picture. Whenever anons joke about “an hero,” a trolling term for suicide, wax poetic about drug use, or ask Anonymous for advice, the standard response is “do it faggot,” often accompanied by a picture of someone or something (cartoon characters, dogs, bears, children) bearing his or its teeth grotesquely. The accusation of “faggotry” is rampant, from second person claims that “your a faggot” to sophomoric discussions of “buttsecks.” And yet when asked to self-identify, whether in terms of geography of college or major or interest, anons automatically affix “fag” to the end of whatever self-reflexive noun. Thus novice posters are “newfags,” old hands are “oldfags,” people posting in California are “Califags,” posters claiming to be gay are “gayfags,” and so on. Depending on the context, “-fag” can function as a homophobic slur, term of endearment, or neutral mode of self-identification.

In addition to scrambling precise demographics, anonymity has a profound behavioral impact. Most obviously, because there are no repercussions for posting racist, sexist, homophobic or exploitative text and/or images, and because trolling is characterized by transgressive one-upmanship, /b/ is overrun by highly offensive and sometimes explicitly illegal content, including child pornography. 4chan’s official policy is that it has zero-tolerance for kiddie porn, and in 2008 moot claimed to have banned over 70,000 IP addresses (Brophy-Warren 2008). But the moderators can only work so fast, and can only oversee a certain percentage of threads. It is inevitable that even the most offensive content occasionally falls through the cracks.

As shocking as some of the content on 4chan, and especially on /b/, might be, the site's traffic stats are even more so. In July of 2008, *Time* reported that 4chan received 8.5 million average daily page views and 3.3 million unique monthly visitors (Grossman 2008a), and in August of that same year, the *New York Times* clocked 4chan's monthly hit-rate (a metric which includes both unique and non-unique users) at 200 million (Schwartz 2008). A 2009 *Washington Post* article cited moot's internal metrics at 400,000 daily posts (Hesse 2009), a figure that had nearly doubled by 2010 (Fisher 2010), and by March of 2010, the *New York Times* reported that the daily page view total had climbed to 800,000 and that the site boasts 8.2 million unique monthly visitors (Bilton 2010). Later that year, moot ran a ChartBeat data tag which tracked the total number of eyeballs on 4chan and discovered that the site is host to 60,000 overall users *at any given moment* and 10,000 on the front page of /b/ alone ("Mainstreaming the Web" 2010). As a result, 4chan relies on five servers and processes the equivalent of twenty terabytes of data per day (FAQ 2010).

## How Did We Get Here?

As previously mentioned, 4chan was created in 2003 by then-15 year old moot. It began as a content overflow site for a *Something Awful* sub-forum known as the "Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse." moot was a regular contributor to ADTRW, and wanted to archive contributions by other SA users, known as "goons" (FAQ 2010). 4chan began attracting users outside the intended sub-forum, and soon after its creation became a destination unto itself, complete with its own lexicon and behavioral norms.

One of these norms was the appropriation of the term “troll.” Though many of 4chan’s earliest users were affiliated with *Something Awful*, and would have self-identified as goons, trolling became the nominative of choice on 4chan’s /b/ board. Most significantly, these early adaptors embraced a particular orientation towards their targets—lulz, a corruption of lol (“laugh out loud”). Like Schadenfreude, lulz emerge from the misfortune of others. Unlike Schadenfreude, which implies passive enjoyment of random misfortunes, the agent of lulz is either the direct source of the target’s misfortune, or at the very least is living vicariously through the responsible party.

Although many of the trolls I’ve worked with insist that lulz is equal-opportunity laughter, the vast majority of lulz are derived from targeting people of color (especially African American), women, gay men and lesbians. This is not to say that historically dominant groups are impervious to lulz; Christians, Republicans, and white people generally have generated a great deal of trollish laughter. Trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously, so they affect an aggressively oppositional and highly gendered stance whenever they encounter sentimentality or simply ideological rigidity—an ideologically rigid assumption unto itself.

With lulz acting as a behavioral anchor, trolling culture began to coalesce. By 2006, and as an extension of their now-familiar hivemind rhetoric (“none of us is as cruel as all of us”), trolls on /b/ had adopted a collective anonymous identity. Specifically, the mass noun “Anonymous.” Unfortunately, it is impossible to know exactly when the adjectival form of anonymous gave rise to Anonymous as mass noun; *Encyclopedia*

*Dramatica*, a wiki devoted to all things troll and which contained user-generated entries dating back to 2004, was deleted by founder Sharrod DeGrippo in 2011. Although the front page of each entry was saved, the result of emergency intervention on the part of Web Ecology, all pre-2011 edits to the site were lost.

Thanks to user-generated content on other sites, however, it is possible to estimate /b/'s subcultural timeline. In the case of Anonymous, and based on several *Urban Dictionary* entries which tag the term in relation to /b/ and 4chan, we know that the mass noun Anonymous was in circulation by 2006. These same entries also reveal that by 2007, Anonymous had already spawned the Anonymous Credo (variously, "The Code of Anonymous"), which has since undergone a number of iterations but initially opened with the somewhat ironic claim that "We are Anonymous, and we do not forgive" (UD 2007).

At the time, Anonymous was personified by "greenman," a well-dressed avatar whose face is obscured by the phrase "no photo available." Rhetorically, this was no accident; from the very beginning, "Anonymous" was understood to be a loose collective animated by countless anonymous agents. When anons would refer to Anonymous' exploits, they were thus referencing both the rhetorical power of the faceless collective as well as its behavioral effects.

Initially, greenman was confined to on-site interactions. Trolls referenced Anonymous (and individual anons) on 4chan, and would use the moniker when contributing to off-site raid boards (i.e. staging areas for organized anonymous attacks), but rarely flashed this calling card in uninitiated circles. As the subculture grew, however, anons began crediting Anonymous on public forums, including *Urban Dictionary* and

*YouTube*. Still, through mid-2007, knowledge of and interest in Anonymous was mostly confined to participating anons.

Then July 27th, Fox News aired its now-infamous "Report on Anonymous." "They call themselves Anonymous," anchor John Beard begins. "They are hackers on steroids, treating the web like a real-life video game…sacking websites and invading Myspace accounts, disrupting innocent peoples' lives…and if you fight back, *watch out*." Later in the clip, reporter Phil Shuman describes Anonymous as a "hacker gang" and "internet hate machine" hell-bent on destruction. "I've had seven different passwords and they've got 'em all so far," one interviewee alleges. "I believe they're domestic terrorists," insists another, a proclamation followed by stock-footage of an exploding service van.

As Shuman explains, Anonymous is as merciless as it is clandestine. One woman, a mother, faced constant telephone harassment and was forced to get a dog; a boy named David was dumped by his girlfriend when hackers posted "gay sex pictures" to his Myspace wall; several sports stadiums received bomb threats, now thought to be a hoax. Later in the report, a former member of Anonymous—whose face and voice have been obscured, presumably for his own protection—accuses the alleged hacker gang of threatening to rape and kill him. In the following scene, the mother whose family was targeted, and whose identity is also obscured, pulls closed a pair of window curtains and offers a grim conclusion. "Would [the FBI] do something about it if one of us ended up dead?" she asks. "Probably" ("FOX 11" 2007).

Fox's "Report on Anonymous" was posted to *YouTube* the same day the segment aired; to date, the clip has received nearly two million hits and has amassed over twenty thousand viewer comments. A post made by DancingJesus94 captures the spirit of these responses: “Wow,” he or she writes. “Fox just fed the trolls, and did so in the lulziest way possible. I mean, what’s a bigger ego boost than for Anon to be branded dangerous criminals who can hack your computer by closing their eyes and merely thinking about it” (2010). This was, in other words, a windfall for Anonymous. As a consequence, the terms “hackers on steroids,” “hacker gangs,” and “the internet hate machine” were immediately integrated into the trolling lexicon, as was the image of the exploding service van, which was rechristened the 4chan party van and trotted out whenever law enforcement took interest in trolling raids (“getting v&” has since become shorthand for being arrested).

Not only did 4chan receive an enormous PR boost from Fox’s coverage, trolls were outfitted with a sound branding strategy. Douglas Thomas describes a similar phenomenon in his study of hacker culture, particularly the “new school” hackers of the early 90s. As Thomas explains, “The media, as well as the public…learned to expect the worst from hackers, and as a result, hackers usually offer that image in return, even if their own exploits are no more than harmless pranks” (2002: 37). By framing Anonymous (and its constituent trolls) as socially deviant, Fox News had inadvertently provided trolls with a behavioral blueprint, along with the promise of further coverage for similar behaviors.

Although Fox News didn’t *create* Anonymous, the Fox 11 News Report gave Anonymous a national platform, upon which trolls built larger and ever-more conspicuous structures. What once has been an underground site, known only to the few thousand active participants, had become a household name; “Anonymous” begin to show up in mainstream media reports only *after* the Fox 11 News Report aired ("Internet Justice" 2007).

Anonymous' next major catalyst came in January of 2008, when Nick Denton at *Gawker* posted an embarrassing video of Tom Cruise lauding the Church of Scientology. Despite receiving a takedown notice from the Church, Denton refused to remove the video, citing it as "newsworthy" (Denton 2008); in response to the Church's attempt to censor the video, some anon posted a comment to /b/ suggesting retribution ("Plan" 2008). Thus began Project Chanology, Anonymous' most ambitious project to date.

Although Anonymous was hardly the first group to set its sights on Scientology (Coleman 2010), it proved to be the most successful. A week after Denton published the Cruise video, Anon released its now-iconic Message to Anonymous ("Message" 2008), and on February 10th, 2008, hundreds of protestors across the country gathered outside local Scientology centers. In order to maintain anonymity, participating anons wore plastic Guy Fawkes masks, a reference to what was then known on 4chan as "Epic Fail Guy," a stick figure drawing indicating failure and disappointment—precisely the message anons hoped to convey about Church doctrine. Images of the protesters, particularly those wearing Guy Fawkes masks, dominated the news, and two days after the first protests, Anonymous was given its own Wikipedia entry.

As Anonymous—and its mothership, the /b/ board—achieved greater cultural prominence, the media became ever shriller in their coverage. This in turn generated greater opportunity for lulz, which courted more media coverage, which engendered more original content, and even more media coverage. Fox News was the vanguard of sensationalism, with Bill O'Reilly leading the pack. After one anon hacked into Sarah

Palin’s Yahoo account, O’Reilly denounced 4chan as “one of those despicable, slimy, scummy websites” (Popkin 2008) and urged the FBI to take drastic measures (“Palin” 2008; “Hackers” 2008).

Anonymous took this opportunity to declare outright war on Fox News, particularly O’Reilly. After the Palin hack, trolls raided O’Reilly’s website and released users’, as well as O’Reilly’s, contact information (Danchev 2008). Similar tactics were deployed in response to one Talking Points/Confronting Evil segment in which O’Reilly claimed that “A far-left website known as ‘4chan’ is providing child pornography to internet pedophiles” (O’Reilly 2009).

A year later, Anonymous initiated “Operation Bill Haz Cheezburgers,” yet another attempt to disrupt his website. Unlike previous raids, however, this was designed to kill with kindness. “Try not to send him anything R rated,” wrote the initiating anon. “That way when he rages on the air he’ll have zero ammo and everyone will look at him like he’s crazy for getting mad at kittens.” For the next few hours, Anonymous spammed O’Reilly with hundreds of incoherent laudatory messages, as well as pictures of bunnies, ducks and cats, many of which were captioned with the phrase “The Internet Love Machine.” At some point during the raid, someone reposted O’Reilly’s home address. Pineapple and pepperoni pizzas were subsequently sent, and one Anon photoshopped a screencap of O’Reilly’s face that read “What? I didn’t order any pizza. I don’t even like pineapples” (“Operation Bill Can Haz Cheezburgers” 2009).

In short, Fox’s various responses to Anonymous, 4chan, and trolls generally helped fortify the borders of what at the time was a localized phenomenon but which soon emerged as a full-blown subculture. Not only did these stories augment the trolling lexicon, that is, provide trolls with additional memetic material, they helped legitimize the development of a discrete, deliberate, and highly recognizable trolling identity. Put another way, and with Fox News leading the charge, trolls were given a framework upon which to build their public face. They happily set up camp, and thanks to an increasingly incensed mainstream media, were furnished with a constant supply of food. The framework proved expansive. Anonymous grew stronger, and the media vacillated between feeding and decrying its hideous progeny.

## Scientists of the Concrete

The collusion between trolls and mainstream media outlets cultivates a set of behavioral and linguistic tropes, which in turn necessitate and sustain a distinctive trolling style. *Necessitates* because these tropes demarcate exactly who and exactly what qualifies as trolls/as trolling and *maintains* because they contextualize and reconfigure the meaning(s) of emergent behaviors and content—a process that lines up nicely with Dick Hebdige's account of the development of subcultural style, particularly via bricolage. Described as the "science of the concrete" (1979: 103), the bricoleur is the scientist of the concrete; he gathers and reconfigures socially significant artifacts, then reanimates his creations with novel meaning(s).

On 4chan, the "explosive junction" of otherwise-unrelated thing to otherwise-unrelated thing (Hebdige 1979: 103) is accelerated by the material structures of 4chan itself. Specifically, 4chan is ephemeral; individual boards can only hold so much information before booting older data to make way for new content. As a result, few threads remain on the site for more than a few minutes, and those that make it to the front page typically disappear within the hour. Content does "stick," however—if enough users engage a particular piece of content, either through reposting or remixing, it will enter the subculture lexicon. It will become, in other words, a meme.

The definition of the term meme is a source of some debate. Many theorists, including Henry Jenkins, insist that memetic theory, which is often described in terms of viral infection, posits a model of unwitting transmission and therefore undermines individual agency (2009). I am sympathetic to Jenkins' concerns, and am similarly resistant to the assumption that audiences are little more than media "carriers," i.e. passive vessels for corporate content. That said, within the context of trolling culture, "meme" carries a much more active connotation. For trolls, memes cohere within a holistic system of subcultural meaning; memes only make sense in relation to other memes. Users are expected to keep track of these shifting subcultural sands, making recognition and replication of specific memes and meme-families tantamount to keeping up with the Jones' (or more appropriately to 4chan, with the Doe's). Recognizing a meme, remixing a meme, referencing a meme—these actions establish a set of subculture borders, thus providing a "meaningful whole" to which additional signifiers may cohere (Hebdige 1979: 103, 113). Within the trollspace, these seemingly chaotic signs—whether expressed through language or artifacts—*do* something. In the context of trolling, they build worlds.

Over 9000 Penises, a wildly successful and much celebrated ubermeme, illustrates the process by which subcultural worlds are built, providing a textbook example of the amplificatory relationship between trolls and the mainstream media. Not only does it illustrate how trollspaces are built, it highlights what kinds of worlds trolls are inclined to create. Trolls aren't, after all, summoning content ex nihilo; they are cultural scavengers, fashioning amusement from that which already exists. And more often than not, what already exists first passes through the mainstream media filter. The relationship between trolls and the media, then, isn't just unsurprising, it's close to definitional—forcing us to rethink our framing not just of trolls, but of the media itself.

Our analysis begins with Pedobear, one of /b/'s most durable images. Based upon Japan's "Safety Bear," the image of whom would accompany anime deemed inappropriate for children, its American counterpart is a much more ambiguous figure ("Pedobear" 2011). Sometimes drooling, sometimes sweating, sometimes featuring a sombrero or the words "DO WANT," Pedobear is always scrambling towards something. It is not until one realizes precisely what he is chasing *after* that his form takes on new significance—"Pedo" is short for "Pedophile," making Pedobear the unofficial mascot of child pornography ("CP" in the trolling world). This is not to say that Pedobear represents real life interest in or support for child exploitation. More often than not, the image is used mockingly, as an implicit criticism of another anon's apparent predilection for young girls, or in relation to some other meme, most notably the meme-cluster surrounding Dateline's "To Catch a Predator" and its host Chris Hansen.

The image of Pedobear sometimes does accompany CP, and sometimes does make light of, if not actively celebrate, sexualized images of children. Even this is a slippery territory, however, since CP is often deployed as trollbait against other trolls—it's one of the few things shocking enough to unsettle even the most jaded troll. Consequently, and despite the fact that posting CP onto 4chan is a permabannable offense (meaning that, if the site administrators encounter any CP, they isolate the poster's 10-digit IP address and permaban the offending anon), posting CP, or as is usually the case, *threatening* to post CP, or making jokes about posting CP—which almost always appear alongside images of Pedobear—has become a meme in itself.

We may now turn to the meme itself. Its first component is the phrase “over 9000,” a nonsense numerical value taken from DragonBallZ, a popular manga series. Originally released in Japan in 1989, DragonBallZ premiered on American television in 1996 and became a cultural touchstone for a generation of anime fans and gamers. In one episode, heroes Vegeta and Nappa prepare to fight a villain named Goku; they consult their “scouter,” a device that measures an opponent’s power level. Nappa asks Vegeta what the scouter says about levels, to which Vegeta growls, “It’s over nine THOUSAAAAANNND” and subsequently smashes the scouter in his hand (“9000!!” 2006). Someone posted this clip onto /b/; perhaps due to nostalgia, perhaps due to the fact that “over 9000” was a mistranslation of “over 8000,” thus providing built-in conversation (not to mention trolling) fodder, perhaps due to moot’s subsequent implementation of a word filter that changed all instances of the number 7 to “Over 9000,” Anonymous adopted “Over 9000” as the default answer to any question involving numerical value.

The second component of the meme is much more straightforward. In September of 2008, some anon decided to troll Oprah’s message boards by posing as a pedophile. Oprah, who had spent the previous week lobbying for legislation designed to crack down on online predation, was made aware of the poster and decided to share what he had posted. “Let me read you something posted on our message boards,” she gravely began, “from somebody who claims to be a member of a known pedophile network: He said he does not forgive. He does not forget. His group has over 9000 penises and they're all…raping…children" ("Oprah OVER 9000 PENISES" 2008).

Within the hour, a second anon downloaded Oprah's warning, which unbeknownst to her featured an iteration of the Anonymous Credo, and spliced the clip into a music video featuring Pedobear, Oprah, the characters from DragonBallZ and Chris Hansen ("Pedobear remix" 2008). To the trolling community, this was a win on every front. In a 2008 edit of the Oprah Winfrey entry on *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, the corresponding video and transcript were accompanied by a photoshopped picture of Oprah sitting with a smug-looking monster. Pulling from the popular "[adjective] [noun] is [adjective]" meme, the picture is captioned with the phrase "Successful troll is successful" (2008).

But why? What exactly was so successful about Over 9000 Penises? First of all, it is critical to address its transgressive appeal. Is no accident that trolls targeted *this* forum on *this* issue, nor is it insignificant that the resulting lulz continued long after the initial raid ended. Trolls would not have cared, or wouldn't have cared as much, if the issue hadn't been such a hot button for so many people. As it is, child exploitation, especially when sexual in nature, is one of the few taboos unaffected by political standpoint. As a result, whether deployed on 4chan or off-site, pedophilia (either threats of or references to) is one of the most exploitable tools in the trolls' arsenal. That the "joke" made it all the way to the Oprah Winfrey show was profoundly amusing to participating trolls.

Even more amusing was the its status as subcultural Trojan Horse. Simply by uttering the phrase "Over 9000 penises"—by uttering "Over 9000" *anything*—Oprah had marked the trolls' territory. Anyone even remotely connected to 4chan (or online culture generally) immediately knew that trolling had been afoot, and even better, that Oprah was a pawn in the trolls' game. This in turn raised trolls' online visibility, therefore lending even more infamy to an already infamous hivemind, and provided a catalyst for further memetic creation.

## Bricolage: Cycles of Amplification and Spectacle

In addition to providing a textbook example of how trolls and the media feed into each other, as well as the ways in which media interventions generate further subcultural scaffolding, Over 9000 Penises reveals the rhetorical and behavioral similarities between trolling and corporate media. The most conspicuous of these similarities is the respective push for *success*. For the trolls, Over 9000 Penises was successful because it harnessed and exploited a particularly sensitive cultural trope, and in the process generated a great deal of lulz. Trolls were not the only successful party, however; the success of the trolling raid hinged on the success of Oprah's producers. The ends diverged somewhat, in that Oprah was courting a horrified yet sympathetic audience while trolls were merely courting a horrified audience, but the means by which these goals were achieved were in fact identical. Both trolls and Oprah's production team tugged at the audience's heartstrings, deployed emotionally loaded language, and exactingly exploited the human interest angle. Most significantly to this analysis, both had something to gain from their audience's distress.

The apparent overlap between trolls and Oprah's producers is unsurprising. Trolls frequently engage in a complicated form of ideological shadow play with those they seek to exploit, particularly in their dealings with the mainstream media—lending new meaning to the term "outfoxed." Like corporate media outlets, trolls go where the stories are; like corporate media outlets, trolls revel in sensationalism and hyperbole. In short, both trolls and the media are invested in *spectacle*, the process through which business and entertainment fuse (Kellner 2003).

Of course, what qualifies as "business" for one diverges from "business" as understood by the other. Most basically, the media is invested in the accrual of capital, while trolls are invested in the accrual of lulz. But in the service of achieving these stated goals—interestingly, the pursuit of lulz is explicitly described by trolls as being "serious business"—both camps must make as strong an impact as possible. They must engage an audience; they must ensure that people pay attention. The relationship between trolls and the media, in other words, is not diametric. Unlike the dynamic described by Gabriella Coleman in her fascinating analysis of the Church of Scientology and post-Chanology Anonymous, which argues that the ethos and tactics of the former is a direct inversion of the latter (2010), trolls and mainstream media are in fact homologous. Both camps engage in the same behaviors, for divergent ends.

It is tempting to suggest that corporate media are vast institutions of trolling, or at least that individual media personalities are themselves trolls. This however would be a misnomer, since trolling, especially trolling associated with 4chan and early Anonymous, is predicated on subcultural identification. Trolls are people who act like trolls, and talk like trolls, and troll like trolls, because they've chosen to adopt that identity.

I would however suggest that trolls have much more in common with the media, or perhaps more appropriately, that the media has more in common with trolls, than its corporate backers or viewers would care to admit. In terms of their engagement with media, and based on the marked similarities between trolling and sensationalist media practices, I would argue that trolls jam the culture not by directly challenging the dominant culture, but by embodying the dominant culture, specifically by exploiting the very sensationalist imperative that keeps advertisement revenues high.

In this sense, trolling echoes *détournement* as described by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman. According to Debord and Wolman, *détournement*, which can loosely be translated as "hijacking" or "rerouting," occurs when cultural objects are recontextualized, thus imbuing a given artifact with newfound subversive meaning. *Minor détournement* is achieved when value-neutral artifacts are placed alongside each other, thus reconfiguring the meaning of each, while *deceptive détournement* subversively redeploys already-significant artifacts. *The Colbert Report*, which affects neoconservatism in order to undermine neoconservativism, is a prominent example of the latter, while a Photoshopped image of a cat riding a dog would be an example of the former.

Whether minor or deceptive, both forms of *détournement* challenge or at the very least remix dominant ideals through creative and often absurdist appropriation (Debord and Wolman 1956). Most significantly for this study, artifacts may be *détourned* via pointed mimicry, the effect of which is to "reinforce the real meaning of an original element" (Jappe 1999: 59). In these cases, an artifact—a well-known quote from literature, a movie still or news clip—is placed in oppositional context and subsequently ironized, thus allowing the artifact to indict itself through itself.

Trolling, which simultaneously mimics and mocks, which uses dominant tropes in order to disrupt dominant institutions, provides a textbook example of *détournement*. Trolls troll Fox News by acting like Fox News, and troll Oprah Winfrey by acting like

Oprah Winfrey, then howl with laughter when their chosen targets unwittingly rail against their own reflections. Whether or not trolls are motivated by political concerns, whether or not they intend to challenge dominant ideology, their behaviors *détourn* existing tropes, and therefore implicate their source—at least by proxy. Decrying trolls without considering their homologous relationship to mainstream culture, in this case the media that feeds them, is therefore comparable to denouncing the reflection but not the object reflected.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Carol Stabile, Lisa Gilman, David Li, Doug Blandy, Chris Menning and the Web Ecology Project for their generous feedback throughout the writing and research process.

## References

9000!!!! 2008. *Youtube*, 24 June. Accessed 1 July 2008 from http://www.youtube.com /watch?v=SiMHTK15Pik.

*4chan*. Accessed 4 October 2009 from http://www.4chan.org/.

*4chan*. FAQ. Accessed 23 October 2009 from http://www.4chan.org/faq.

Anonymous. 2006. *Urban dictionary*. Last modified 3 November 2006. Accessed 15 December 2011 from http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Anonymous&page=6#.

Anonymous Credo. 2007. *Urban dictionary*. Last modified 9 May 2007. Accessed 15 December 2011 from http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Anonymous&defid=2409401

Anonymous on FOX 11 news, 2007. *Youtube*, 27 July. Accessed 10 October 2008 from http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=DNO6G4ApJQY&feature=player_embedded.

Anonymous proposes a plan. 2008. *4chan Archive*, 15 January. Accessed 20 December 2011, http://4chanarchive.org/brchive/dspl_thread.php5?thread_id=51051816.

Bill O'Reilly—Sarah Palin email. 2008. *Youtube*, 18 September. Accessed 18 September 2008 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCSaF4KC3eE&feature=player_embedded.

Bill O'Reilly: A far-left website known as "4chan" is providing child pornography to internet pedophiles. 2009. *Reddit* (via tinypic), 27 August. Accessed 1 October 2011 from http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/9eslq/bill_oreilly_a_farleft_website_known_as_4chan_is/.

Bilton, N. 2010. One on one: Christopher Poole, founder of 4chan. *The New York Times*, 19 March. Accessed 19 March 2010 from http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/19/one-on-one-christopher-poole-founder-of-4chan/.

boyd, d. 2008. Choose your own adventure. *danah.org*. Accessed 19 September 2011. http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.html.

boyd, d. 2009. Why youth use social network sites: the role of networked publics in teenage social life. In *Youth, identity and digital media*, edited by D. Buckingham, 1-26. Cambridge: MIT Press/MacArthur Foundation.

Boellstorff, T. 2009. *Coming of age in second life.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brophey-Warren, J. 2008. Modest web site is behind a bevy of memes. *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 July. Accessed 1 October 2010 from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121564928060441097.html.

Coleman, G. 2010. Old & new net wars over free speech, freedom & secrecy: Or how to understand the hacker & lulz battle against the Church of Scientology. *Vimeo.com*. Accessed 10 December 2010 from http://vimeo.com/user3514769/videos.

Coleman, G. 2011. The ethnographers cunning: the return of the arm chair and keyboard anthropologist. Presentation to the American Anthropological Association 16 November 2011.

Cohen, S. 1972. *Folk devils and moral panics*. New York: Routledge.

Debord, G and Wolman, G. 1956. A user's guide to *détournement.* In *Situationist international anthology*, translated and edited by K. Knabb, 14-21. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets.

Danchev. 2008. Bill O'Reilly's website hacked, attackers release personal details of users. ZDnet.com, 24 September. Accessed 1 October 2009 from http://blogs.zdnet.com/security/?p= 1958.

Denton, N. 2008. The Cruise indoctrination video Scientology tried to suppress. *Gawker*, 15 January. Accessed 20 December 2011 from http://gawker.com/5002269/the-cruise-indoctrination-video-scientology-tried-to-suppress.

Kellner, D. 2003. Media culture and the triumph of the spectacle. *Media spectacle*, 1-33. Routledge: New York.

Grossman, L. 2008a. The master of memes. *Time*, 9 July. Accessed 1 October 2010 from http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1821435,00.html#ixzz1BPrkHDWe.

Grossman, L. 2008b. Now in paper version: The 4chan guy. *Time: Techland*, 10 July. Accessed 1 October 2010 from http://techland.time.com/2008/07/10/now_in_papervision_the_4chan_g/

Hal Turner Vs Anonymous. 2007. *YouTube*, 3 January. Accessed 15 December 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmIpWw2zvVI.

Hesse, M. 2009. A virtual unknown: meet 'moot,' the secretive Internet celeb who still lives with mom. *The Washington Post*, 17 February. Accessed 1 October 2010 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/conten t/article /2009/02/16/AR2009021601565.html.

Hebdidge, D. 1979. *Subculture: The meaning of style*. New York: Routledge.

Internet Justice. 2007. *YouTube*, 8 December. Accessed 15 December 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHohvluf3mc&feature=player_embedded#!

Ito, M. 1997. Virtually embodied: The reality of fantasy in a multi-user dungeon. In *Internet Culture*, edited by D. Porter, 87-111. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. 2009. If it doesn't spread, it's dead. *Henryjenkins.org*, 11 February. Accessed 5 December 2011 from http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html.

Jappe, A. 1999. *Guy Debord*. University of California Press: Berkley.

Message to Scientology. 2008. *YouTube*. 21 January. Accessed 20 December 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ.

Nakamura, L. 2007. *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the internet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Nakamura, L. 2002. *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet.* New York: Routledge.

Nakamura, L., Kolko, B. and G. Rodman. 2000. *Race in cyberspace.* New York: Routledge.

Oprah over 9000 penises! 2008. *Youtube*, 3 October. Accessed 3 October 2008 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slDAPms8Tvs&feature=player_embedded.

Oprah Winfrey. 2011. *Encyclopedia Dramatica*. Last modified 11 September 2011. Accessed 20 September 2011 from http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Oprah.

Operation Bill can haz cheezburgers. 2009. *4chan.org*. Thread accessed 7 November 2009.

O'Reilly's calling FBI on Palin hackers & lib blog posters. 2008. *Youtube*. Accessed 17 September 2008 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X8NJL3W2U8&feature=player_ embedded (since deleted).

Oprah over 9000 penises f/ PEDOBEAR remix. 2008. *YouTube*. Accessed 10 October 2008 (since deleted).

Outfoxed: Fox News Technique "Some People Say." 2007. *YouTube*, 9 May. Accessed 20 December 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYA9ufivbDw.

Pedobear. 2011. *Know Your Meme*. Last modified November 2011. Accessed December 2011 from http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pedobear.

Popkin, H. 2008. Bill O'Reilly's website hacked. *MSNBC.com*, 26 September. Accessed 1 October 2009 from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26870105/ns/technology_and_science-tech_ and _ gadgets/.

Sauthoff, T. 2009. 4chan: The rude, raunchy underbelly of the Internet. *Fox News.com*, 8 April. Accessed 1 October 2009 from http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,512957,00.html.

Schwartz, M. 2008. Malwebolence: The trolls among us. *New York Times Online*, 8 August. Accessed 1 October 2009 from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html.

Schaap. 2002. *The words that took us there: Ethnography in a virtual reality.* New York: Askant Academic Publishers.

Thomas, D. 2002. *Hacker culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.