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/pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the ways in which online, anonymous interaction on the website 4chan.org can complicate traditionally situated discursive theory. Through an examination of the politically incorrect board (/pol/), this paper begins to reanalyze scale, alignment, and double-voicing approaches in ways that necessitate novel understandings of digitally placed discourse. This website has demonstrated unique engagements with these categories, engaging with global and personal discourses through anonymity, geographically “situated” flag markers, and green-text narrative techniques, among others. This essay contains a number of examples found through 4chan’s /pol/ via qualitative-oriented, inscriptive gathering techniques of discourses concerning both the continuing European and American migration issues, as they are explored by a globally situated, digital community. Through banal, everyday engagements with both the material and the website features themselves, users craft new realizations of identity and interaction in a space that seeks to make all anonymous.

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1. Introduction

Websites such as 4chan.org allow for novel (re)understandings of classic notions of researching talk, text, and discourse. Indeed, frameworks such as Bakhtin’s double-voicing (1981) are complicated through an intricate web of anonymity, site architecture, and circulating language ideologies. In addition, interactions between commonly understood scales are consistently and thoroughly reworked and re-imagined on such websites, creating new configurations. Users on 4chan, and specifically on the board known as politically incorrect (henceforth /pol/) are constantly negotiating between the individual and the national; simultaneously performing, as through Goffman’s (1981) alignment framework, both an individualized and a nationally anthropomorphized self (see also Pagliai, 2012). Hegemonic institutions such as “whiteness” and other ideologies of racial and international discourses become especially salient on this website and particularly on this board. Through anonymity and this specific call for political incorrectness (or to some, mayhem or trolling; see Kirman, 2012), groups occupying and exercising these ideologically dominant discourses online become especially visible. “Dominant,” in this context, refers to the most visible and popular discourse that occurs here on /pol/, frequently directing the flow of conversation or content. It is my purpose in this paper to explore these dominant discourses as they emerge through /pol/’s discursive space and how classic issues of

scale, performance, and double voicing may be complicated by these online anonymous interactions.

2. 4chan: History, methods, data

My field site is situated exclusively on the website 4chan.org, which began as a simple Americanized version of a Japanese imageboard website 2chan.net, otherwise known as Futaba Channel. Like Futaba Channel, 4chan is an anonymous image board, styled as a bulletin-board based website where users post one image and/or body of text in a single post. 4chan has an ongoing reputation for being one of the birthplaces for “meme-culture” online, as well as a space for potentially offensive, deviant behavior. This practiced and perceived deviancy is due to the default blanket of anonymity present on the website. Users operate in an opt-out system of anonymity, and the general discourse of the website encourages users to remain unnamed. This is further enforced and embodied as named users, colloquially known as “namefags,” are often vilified for their separation from the anonymous collective community.

4chan is divided up into a variety of thematically oriented “boards,” sub-forums that all cater to niche interests. Historically, the website only contained two boards, /a/ for anime, and /b/ for everything else (now known as “random”). Now there are over 65 boards, ranging from pornographic niches, to television, gaming, and cooking. Within these boards, I have focused my research on a specific board titled “Politically Incorrect,” better known by its URL extension: /pol/. True to its title, /pol/ is a space for discussion

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of world politics in ways that deviate firmly (and proudly) from the normal discursive emphasis of “politically correct” understanding and inclusion, normally stereotyped with those who identify with more liberal political ideologies. As a result, much of what is viewed and read on /pol/ can be understood as racist, racialized, or otherwise unnecessarily vitriolic and violent, yet is viewed by many in this context as everyday discussion, removed from social policing from politically “correct” others. Congruent with the rest of the website’s architecture, /pol/ users operate under a veil of relative anonymity, with a number of methodologically unique exceptions. First, users on /pol/ have a randomly generated ID for each thread, but unlike the rest of 4chan where this ID is generated per post, on /pol/ it remains stable throughout the thread (though not on the board). Second, each user and post have a small flag that signals the country that the user posts from through their IP address. These flags mostly indicate country of origin, and users engage with these images almost as much as they engage with the content being created and circulated by other users. Thus, on /pol/, users still may engage with other anonymous users, but with the added knowledge that they are responding to a person (or computer) from a particular geo-political location. Though some users may implement a VPN (virtual private network, used as an added layer of security for surfing online) and thus hide or change their country of origin, I am operating under the assumption that a significant amount of posters on this board are *not* using that type of software, given that 4chan is anonymous enough for most users. I incorporate these features through screen-captured inscripts (Jones and Schieffelin 2016) to help inform my argument—that users on this particular board navigate a Bakhtinian double-voicing (1981; 1986), simultaneously mobilizing both the voices of an individual citizen of a country and the country as an anthropomorphized entity. This board creates a unique space for posters, and the site architecture allows for creative and novel re-imagining of scales, identity, and performativity of personal and international political discourse ideologies.

Within 4chan, users pride themselves on their anonymity over most other features, with Milner (2012, 2013) describing anonymity as the “First Amendment” of the Internet. Indeed, many users take this anonymity very seriously, and many more mobilize this feature to their discursive advantage. Additionally, threads started on 4chan have a short lifespan; there are limits to the amount of posts that can appear on a single thread before the oldest posts are automatically deleted. Additionally, posts that have lost interest are eventually “buried” to the hindmost, least visible pages and eventually deleted to make room for new threads and discussions. Unless users intervene to archive posts they are deleted permanently and without preamble. Thus, the ephemerality and non-permanence of posts seems to encourage users to make their posts as often and as potentially inflammatory as possible – knowing full well that these threads will, more likely than not, erase themselves in a matter of minutes or hours. Interestingly enough, these features complicate the way the examples in this work are examined. Since there can be little follow up due to post deletion, coupled with most users operating through an anonymous filter, all interactions recorded and observed on this website – even on /pol/ with its thread-stable IDs – must be taken at face value. That is, there is little contextualization beyond the hyper-present and immediate discussions taking place; anything beyond that must be captured through outside intervention or screen-capturing the images for one’s own collection or circulation.

I implement the research methodology *inscription*, developed by Jones and Schieffelin (2016). Rather than using traditional methods such as audio recordings and transcription, the text based interactions that dominate online participation require different methods of collecting and collating the work. For many sources online, requirements for inscription include names, timestamps and user-

names (if applicable), along with any other relevant information. These can be collected simply copying and pasting from the context, or taken as a screenshot from a computer, and saved as a picture. On 4chan the issue of preservation, as well as the unique structure of posts, complicate matters of inscription and proper recording of the data as it (dis)appears. To preserve the structure of the text, as well as other relevant information (flag, code, picture, etc.), I gathered the data by screen-capturing these posts and freezing them as static images. I then added line numbers using paint.net, an open-source photo manipulation program. I chose to preserve these posts and interactions through screen-capturing to prevent the data from being permanently deleted, as well as to maintain the “structure” of the post as it appeared. Though I believe this to be the best way to preserve data from 4chan – aside archiving the posts to third party websites, on which I could not consistently rely – there are limitations. The biggest is the inability to follow up on individual posts and their creators. Through this veil of anonymity, I can only take what posters asserted in their contributions at face value. I believe that these challenges associated with this website can inform much about the way interaction online is affected by pseudo/anonymous (as with Dalton, 2013) websites.

3. Bakhtin, Goffman and scales online

I apply a novel interpretation and re-imagining of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) notion of the double voice, as well as ventriloquation, towards understanding how these users navigate their own discourse and dialogues on /pol/ (see Lisecki (2013)). Double voicing, understood through Bakhtin as a heteroglossic concept, is a stylistic feature that allows for characters (in addition to authors and readers) to understand introduced concepts in a plurality. Thus, an author may write an argument or discussion between two characters, each with a differing viewpoint, but simultaneously affirm their own alignment. According to Bakhtin, this allows the author to have multiple voices, multiple arguments, and ultimately multiple ideologies from which to frame an argument. Where double voicing is the concept, ventriloquation may be understood simply as the enactment wherein the characters are ventriloquated and voiced through the author. Online, these concepts emerge in new ways. Voices are given and shifted between not only people as they tell stories, but also through interactions through collapsed and re-imagined scales and spaces, as we see in /pol/. Thus, views are expressed and written in fluidly, and discourses are reorganized in new orientations. Users on /pol/ navigate between these orientations—moving through scales, types of discourse, and levels of engagement—all in simultaneous, hyper-contextual instances that rely heavily on the ephemeral, anonymous ecology of 4chan’s media space. Double voicing here can be seen literally; users navigate between being individuals (albeit individuals that exist in states that are identified through flags on posts) and the actual countries themselves. Thus, in addition to people’s “characters” voicing multiple perspectives, anthropomorphized national discourses are being collapsed into the hyper-local contextualization of these /pol/ posts. International negotiations and schoolyard banter can and do coincide perfectly with individual discussion and argument between individual persons and identities. Users are free to both voice themselves and ventriloquate generalized national and often politically incorrect discourses. I describe this as *digital despatialization*, in that users are able to navigate new, deterritorialized discursive spaces online. This draws from Anna de Fina’s (2009) conception of spatialization, which examines how space influences the construction of narrative interaction. Despatialization, therefore, operates in a similar fashion, but through the erasure of identity that is so crucial to participation on 4chan, or in

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