

The divergence of /pol/: Mustering memes and the techno-organizational identity during the
2016 United States presidential election

by

Michelle Styrpejko

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Major Professor
Dr. Colene Lind

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Abstract

Since its inception in 2003, 4chan has influenced internet culture through various events, movements, and memes. 4chan's discussion board "politically incorrect," or /pol/ for short, is especially active. While /pol/ has traditionally been utilized as a board for engaging political issues and events, in recent years, the discourse has shifted to the alt-right. Yet this discourse went largely unnoticed by scholars, discounted as the trolling of an online fringe group. However, during the 2016 election, /pol/ users collectively campaigned for Donald J. Trump using traditional and non-traditional political participation and engagement tactics. Some credit /pol/ with turning the tide in favor of the GOP candidate. This leads us to question: what drove /pol/'s political participation and political agency in the 2016 election? This thesis examines the /pol/ board across three pivotal dates to gain a better understanding of /pol/ and their political worldview.

By utilizing Burke's cluster analysis, this thesis examines the discourse on /pol/ on the following three dates: (1) May 3, 2016, the day that Donald Trump becomes the Republican nominee, (2) November 8, 2016, the day of the election, and lastly (3) August 11, 2017, day one of the Charlottesville rallies. Through the examination of word use and associations, cluster criticism allows insight into how these rhetors understand themselves and the way in which they organize their world. Moreover, by illuminating the ideas and arguments of these rhetors, this thesis offers a nuanced picture of /pol/'s political self-identity.

I find that while /pol/'s political involvement and movement was initially based on an affinity for their God, Emperor Trump, the evolution of their agenda and realization of political power sans Trump suggests something more. More specifically, my analysis reveals (1) a sense

of brotherhood expressed on the board, (2) a shifting relationship with Trump, and finally (3) a more sophisticated set of political actors.

Lastly, I consider relevant implications and future directions for scholarship. This thesis indicates the need for more study of online social movements and their benefits and drawbacks, while also calling for political campaigns, anti-hate organizations, and the general populace to pay more attention to /pol/ and similar online groups. Moreover, this thesis demonstrates that interpretive scholarship provides a needed complement to other methods of researching online organizing. Ultimately, I conclude that /pol/ is much more than a group of trolls; they are very real and capable political actors that deserve further scrutiny.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis, perhaps rather abstractly, to a decision. While it would have made more sense to accept one of the other offers I had for grad school out of convenience or comfortability, I made the decision to come to Kansas State. That one decision set off a series of other decisions and moments that influenced my life for the better. This thesis and everything that I gained from my time in Kansas are a product of that decision and I am glad I took the plunge.

Chapter 1 - A Culture All its Own

From the Fapping to Gamergate to Anonymous to LOLcats and Rickrolling, 4chan is no stranger to influencing the internet and its culture. 4chan was founded by Christopher Poole in 2003 and adapted its style from the Japanese imageboard 2chan in which users could post comments and images anonymously without registering any personal information. The discussion board politically incorrect, or /pol/ for short, emerged due to certain anons utilizing the hobby boards as a place to engage in political discourse (Erasmus, 2019). /Pol/ is a board in which political discussion about events and issues, that often devolve into bigoted and hateful discourse, takes place (Erasmus, 2019). This board is also considered a “containment board” in which alt-right content is contained or placed due to the nature of the discourse (Erasmus, 2019, par. 2). Most of its users, believed to be men, often engage in a Lord-of-the-Flies manner, dominated by a “bullying and anarchic society of adolescent boys — or at least, men with the mindset of boys” (Beran, 2017, par 15).

In the 2016 election, the “4chan vote” was not a base that was openly courted by any candidate, nor is it a confirmable as a “crucial voting block that swung the election to Trump” (Ohlheiser, 2016, par. 6). However, as Ohlheiser (2016) argues, its advocacy for “the Trump movement was the perfect pathway for a wider audience of targets” (par. 5). Thus, while it is debatable whether /pol/ users shifted the vote, they did offer a shift in tone that dominated the mainstream through the use of memes, for one (Ward, 2018). Through the creation of memes, /pol/ users exerted influence by injecting propaganda from their board in more consumable form for broader audiences (Erasmus, 2019; Ward, 2018). /Pol/’s discourse and memes became popular on platforms beyond their own, which became a form of political expression that

spanned online platform boundaries (Neiwert, 2018; Hatewatch Staff, 2018). These contributions were traditional political participatory tactics via untraditional means.

To that end, it is rather unprecedented to conceptualize how an online community, so often termed as an internet fringe group, could exert influence in the 2016 election. Regardless of the nature of or extent of that influence, /pol/ did not carry clout in the political game prior to this election. They did not buy television ad spots or make large monetary contributions to the campaign they supported. /Pol/ users made contributions in ways that would puzzle many political scientists. Modern U.S. presidential campaigns are multi-billion-dollar operations, and yet /pol/ users exerted a level of influence that goes against what we as citizens believe to be true about how political campaigns operate, in spite of a lack of financial resources.

Moreover, online groups such as /pol/ were not alone in trying to sway the election. Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) note that the subreddit, The Red Pill, also rallied around Trump. Their cultivation of political action and identity was situated around conceptions of gender and Trump being a ‘real man’ that they wanted in the White House. As Dewey (2014) puts it, 4chan and groups like it are the internet’s boogeymen. They are a formidable, omnipresent force in internet culture, and perhaps now, relevant political actors capable of taking hold of the political narrative in subtle, yet meaningful ways.

Indeed, internet culture is a constantly moving target, and its influence is growing. And as /pol/ so well illustrates, internet culture presents a difficult dilemma for democracy. Democracy requires broad engagement and equal participation from its citizens. The ever-growing online sphere promises exactly this, with its ability to involve a wide array of citizens for the purpose of political involvement and participation via accessible platforms and discussion boards. Political organizing, too, in this virtual agora can be a potent form of citizen involvement

and lead to offline action and results. Consequently, citizens who would have otherwise been unable or unlikely to participate in the political system now can be heard and unite. This would draw away power from the powerful and emancipate the general public, allowing for more political expression and ability to develop an agenda in their favor.

But in practice, the toxic rhetoric that often flourishes in these ‘anything goes’ spaces would hardly qualify as democratic advances and arguably subverts full inclusion with the promotion of racism, misogyny, and other forms of identity marginalization. In the case of /pol/, for instance, bigoted and hateful rhetoric is the norm. Likewise, the reality of online organizing often has little to do with society’s Davids facing the proverbial Goliath. While /pol/ embraced the narrative of Donald Trump as underdog, the board’s unabashed support of the well-funded candidate leads us to wonder who was coopting whom.

To fully understand the dilemma of that online political participation presents to democratic societies, it is imperative that there is better understanding of /pol/ and its activity during the 2016 presidential campaign. More specifically, we need to understand *how* they understood themselves in the midst of this event. Therefore, this study will employ a cluster criticism to gain a better understanding of the discourse /pol/ employed towards political ends and what their words indicate about their worldview.

What We Know, and Do Not, About /Pol/’s Agenda

4chan is an anonymous discussion board, or more aptly put imageboard. This board consists of various discussion boards and threads in which users can converse about specific content. Due to copious discussion on this board, threads become quickly archived or deleted since every new thread created ultimately forces an ‘old’ thread to “fall off” (Erasmus, 2019, par. 8). According to 4chan creator Christopher Poole, 4chan is a “giant communal megaphone;” thus

allowing everyone to be “broadcast at full volume” with all posts visible until manually falling off (Kushner, 2015, par.7). Most notably, 4chan has been involved with controversies such as Anonymous, Gamergate, and the 2016 Presidential election. Beran (2017) asserts that while these events were associated with 4chan, they were still “a group of primarily young males who spent a lot of the time at the computer” (par. 35). With Anonymous offering a form of hacktivist philanthropy, Gamergate further illuminating the misogynic outrage of 4chan’s opinions towards women, in gaming or otherwise, and the 2016 election simply offering a more pronounced version of political involvement (Beran, 2017).

This board prides itself on free speech, or /pol’s conceptions of it, in which “young people, mostly young men, [are] protected by a cloak of anonymity” and share images of pornography and other “content that [revels] in harm to other people” (Beran, 2017, par. 16). This ode to /pol’s misogynistic yet chaotic values system is forwarded by “isolated man-boys [asserting] their right to do or say anything no matter someone else’s feelings” (Beran, 2017, par. 16). According to Thompson (2018), on /pol/ “messages often defy easy political categorization... The board is openly reachable to anyone online, but the user experience seems more like that of the dark web...” (par. 1). /Pol/ is a board that does not try to be understood but that does have an agenda (Thompson, 2018, par. 1).

The political discussions on this board often “dissolve into racial or misogynistic slurs,” (Dewey, 2014, par. 18) and it acts as a “major online hub for far-right politics, memes, and coordinated harassment campaigns” (Erasmus, 2019, par. 2). To that end, Andrew Anglin, the creator and editor of The Daily Stormer, a website similar in style to 4chan’s imageboard, states that at first “racist jokes were kicked around semi-ironically” on 4chan’s /b/ board, yet on /pol/, the sentiments embedded within these jokes became serious (Ward, 2018, par. 39). Thus, /pol/

ultimately became “a haven” for “aggressive racists,” with “the tone of the Alt-Right” directly related to such roots on 4chan, Anglin asserts (Ward, 2018, par. 39).

While /pol/ users may often attribute their actions as “just for lulz¹”, Phillips (2011) asserts that this is an inherent trait of the online troll culture since they “deliberately court controversial and transgressive humour” (Beran, 2017, par. 16; Phillips, 2011, p. 69). The lulz that trolls seek are not necessarily projected onto a particular target; they are “equal opportunity offenders” that seek to gain humor at anyone else’s expense (Phillips, 2011, p. 69). To his point, Beran (2017) asserts that /pol/ showcases their own sensitivity with extreme insensitivity towards others and hide behind the cloak of humor. However, /pol/ stands for more than just chaos and lulz. /Pol/ does not conform to social norms, political correctness, or constructive critique as a means of binding its members together; instead this group aims to find ways in which their ideas can be absorbed by the mainstream and alt-right factions for their own amusement (Hatewatch, 2018).

Yet, trolling appears to be a paradox. Phillips (2011) states that “trolling is both real and pretend, both playful and malicious” (p.69). Trolling is a one-sided game in which the trolls have the most agency regarding whether they partake or take any of the rhetoric seriously, yet they do not offer the same courtesy to their targets (Phillips, 2011). For trolls the “precise nature of this distress is secondary, if not downright inconsequential, to their enjoyment of its effects” (Phillips, 2011, p.69). Interestingly, since 2012, /pol/’s tone has shifted further and further to the right (Thompson, 2018). While racist, misogynistic, and xenophobic half-jokes are in full swing on /pol/, it is difficult to capture the “full picture of the hate campaign” due to their trolling

¹ Phillips (2011) defines “lulz” as “a particular kind of aggressive, morally ambiguous laughter indicating the infliction of emotional distress” (p. 69).

tactics acting as a “veil of obscurity” towards more sinister ends (Thompson, 2018, par.2). /Pol/ is an “[incubator] of white nationalism” that is capable of turning “ironic anti-Semitism to neo-Nazi terrorism” (Thompson, 2018, par. 2). Therefore, the act of trolling goes beyond being an online prankster; rather, it is an act that is contradictory in nature but purposeful.

Even still, 4chan and /pol/ have a claim to fame that precedes everything else: memes. Beran (2017) asserts that not only was 4chan responsible for creating early, memorable memes, but they invented the format that we commonly use today (par. 10). However, /pol/’s penchant for memes ultimately served to garner more influence than the lulz they originally wanted. In 2016, /pol/ found themselves involved in an online movement and meme war. They encouraged each other to vote and produced memes that were widely circulated around the internet that perpetuated a pro-Trump, anti-Hillary agenda, with subversive notions of racism and misogyny snuck in. These memes ultimately caught the attention of the Clinton campaign; subsequently, they issued an explanation of the Pepe the frog meme and its white nationalist symbolism. These memes arguably worked as “Pepe has been showing up online as a Trump supporter, a Nazi, a white nationalist, or sometimes Trump himself — in one popular version of the image, he’s even got Trump’s hair” (Singal, 2016, par 2).

The production of these memetic images illustrates the trolling nature of the group but also illuminates how their agenda-building appeared in their discourse and in their memes as a means of political participation and engagement. As Schreckinger (2017) notes, “there is no real evidence that memes won the election, but there is little question they changed its tone” due to influence that online technologies have on political engagement (par. 7). Regardless, in 2016, Trump retweeted supporters’ memes often (Deseret News, 2017). Moreover, within the Trump campaign itself, the circulation of memes ultimately positioned Trump in a positive light and

created an “influential (and free) online army of meme-makers who worked independently of any campaign or political party” and riled his opposition (Deseret News, 2017, par. 5).

To Deseret News’ point, Beran (2016) asserts that “Trump’s incompetent, variable, and ridiculous behavior is the central pillar upon which his younger support rests” (par. 71). Trump, like /pol/, is a political outsider, both of parties “[wearing] their insecurities on their sleeve, they fling these insults in wild rabid bursts at everyone else” (Beran, 2016, par. 81). It is this shared political identity of trolling and outlandish behavior that binds them, with white-nationalistic undertones serving as a glue to bind a movement. Moreover, Beran (2016) furthers that /pol/ supports him because “Trump is 4chan,” therefore the meshing of Pepe the Frog and Trump in meme form only serves as a reminder (Beran, 2016, par. 86).

The Potency of Memes

Smith (2013) discusses language, in reference to Burke, and states that humans are symbol-users who can use language to be inclusive, exclusive, or “reinforcing identification in the cult” (346). In /pol/’s case, this was done through word choice and the use of memes to keep their “cult” or their movement enthused; their patches that they wear with pride to show their service in World War Meme in 2016 (Schreckinger, 2017). To that end, Davi (2007) describes the meme as “a replicator that functions as the basic unit of cultural change” and is something that humans can use and manipulate in order produce some sort symbolic action that imbeds itself into the mainstream” (27-28).

/Pol/’s identification ‘in the cult’ illuminates how tricky the concept of identification can be. It depends on the lens through which people might be viewing it and how the agents are acting in relation to one another. In this case, /pol/ had autonomy to perform the acts that promote a certain brand of ideology. The traction that this ideology produced may be

disconcerting but is not new. This sort of discourse previously has existed in and thrived in this space (Feldman, 2015; Hatewatch Staff, 2018). Their engagement in the online sphere, whether through memes or other online action, is potent regardless. This group provides several tensions and contradictions due to these considerations.

***/Pol/*: A Harbinger of Campaigns to Come?**

/Pol/ ultimately forces us to reconsider what we now take for granted in social movements, political participation, and the influence of Web 2.0 technologies on society, in large part. We might wonder, what drove */pol/*'s sense of agency surrounding their discourse and actions, and what does this say about the future of political participation and social movements in the digital world?

While */pol/* may not have been the main reason for Donald Trump's 2016 win, */pol/* played a role in the process. This group ultimately found a new sense of political agency and ultimately advocated for a more white-centric, alt-right version of status-quo in politics. */Pol/* speaks to tensions and a lack of exploration within the literature, since this group is an example of how online discourse can lead to offline action with real-world results and implications. Currently, as I will further establish in chapter 2, there is relatively little attention paid in social-movement and political-participation literature to the negative consequences of easy online mobilization and political action. With new, emerging technologies and social media platform becoming a greater source of unfettered engagement, this arguably puts political power in the hands of any agents who wish to wield their influence. So while social media platforms can be a tool for change, the change could be good or bad for democracy.

To address */pol/* and the dilemma of online politics, this thesis proceeds through five chapters. Following this chapter, Chapter 2 will examine two areas of relevant literature: (1)

social movements, and (2) political participation. Chapter 3 will address the research question at hand by outlining the method I employ and the way in which I analyze my rhetorical artifacts. In this section, I justify use of cluster analysis to examine discourse and images on /pol/. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the analysis of the artifact. Here, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of keywords and cluster terms in the discourse gathered from three pivotal dates on /pol/: (1) when Donald trump became the presumed Republican nominee, (2) the day of the presidential election, and (3) the Charlottesville rallies, ultimately informing this study on the rhetor (s)'s worldview and sense of political agency during the 2016 presidential election. Chapter 5 will conclude with key take-aways, implications and considerations for the populace, and future directions for scholars.

Through the use of a rhetorical cluster analysis, this study illuminates the way that /pol/ came to understand their own political agency and aptitude as political actors during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This study contributes to the existing literature regarding institutional politics and social movements, while also addressing the affordances unique to online politics. Ultimately, this thesis can better inform what online social movements might look like moving forward in different kinds of contexts, with alternate motives and agendas. Thus, the analysis offers a better understanding of how online movements like /pol/ are changing the political, social, and online landscape. But first, a more thorough appreciation for social movements and political participation, as currently understood by scholars, is needed to guide this new investigation.

Chapter 2 - A Movement that Defies Scholarly Models?

/Pol/'s political activities in conjunction with the 2016 presidential campaign are neither anomalous nor well-understood. To illuminate /pol/ and its campaigning and organizing tactics, we might reasonably expect scholarship to improve our understanding of this group and its communication. The following review examines two literatures related to the unique problem that this group poses, including relevant works on social movements and political participation, focusing on scholarship particularly in the online sphere. This review reveals how existing research currently speaks, or fails to speak, to a group like /pol/ and its political influence.

Social Movements

Individuals working together to be more effective in making social change is not new and neither is the study of social movements. In 1970, Hebert Simons created a framework modeling the persuasive element of such phenomena. Simons (1970) focused his scholarship largely on what was required of leaders for movement success. These requirements included rhetorical factors, problems, and strategies used by the leader to gain traction, followers, clout, etc. Bearman and Everett (1993) refer to social movements a "form through which groups challenge the polity" (p. 172). Thus, social movements are "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations engaged in political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared cultural identity" (Diani, 1992, p. 13).

In later decades, the New Social Movement (NSM) theory emerged to fill in the gaps of previous scholarship. NSM asserted that participation can be individual or private (Whalen and Hauser, 1995). In contrast to the very civic assumptions of previous scholarship, NSM holds that the emergence and sustenance of a movement rests on participants' abilities to live their activism

in everyday ways, including consumerism and personal behaviors. In this way, NSM theory opened the door to de-emphasizing the role of a visible, public leader in social movements.

With the rise of Web 2.0, social movements have found themselves gaining momentum online. Taylor and Kent (2014) state that social-activist groups use social media to “build awareness of social issues, amplify prosocial messages, create relationships, and motivate prosocial behaviors that ultimately benefit society” (p. 76). Thus, online spaces have allowed for the mobilization and building of social movements’ political messages (Blumler & Cavanaugh, 1999). Moreover, the mobilization of online movements has created more sophisticated political acts to take place in the political realm.

For example, in 2000 the phenomenon known as “Nader trading” developed. Nader trading was an online, strategic voting movement that emerged during the 2000 presidential election in which citizens traded their votes with other willing citizens to make their vote count for more. This process ultimately gave citizens who participated a new sense of political agency and reconceptualized political participation. This occurrence ultimately led to a nationwide conversation about how voters can use their vote in more useful and strategic ways to achieve a desired result, as well as what social movement leadership can look like in online contexts (Schussman & Earl, 2004).

In other ways, too, social media acts as a space for coordination in which networked individuals are “gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Shirky, 2011, p. 29). Toward that end, one of the earlier examples of a movement mobilizing on a social-media platform was the Indignados movement in Spain in 2011. In this instance, social media showed how useful it could be in organizing a movement. This movement began online and effectively mobilized

supporters through Facebook. Out of reach of the mainstream media and Spanish government, this movement gained support through its utilization of digital media to charter more citizen support. Thus, social media is a powerful tool for citizens of all types, backgrounds, characteristics, and expertises to engage with one another about issues to promote political action per their movement's objectives.

Fast-forward to one of the most recognized and iconic examples of an online, leaderless movement of the last decade: Occupy Wall Street. Gleason (2013) asserts that platforms Twitter in the case of the Occupy Wall Street created multiple avenues for citizens to explore their political participation. Thus, the alternative organizing tactics and informal learning that took place arguably allowed citizens to be politically active actors, without a leader (Gleason, 2013). Here, we see that the erasure of the leader in social-movement scholarship is nearly complete. To that end, while certain social movements might not have a central leader, groups are operating under some form of leadership organization that binds member actions together.

However, that form of leadership might not fall under traditional conceptions as defined by current scholarship on the matter. These groups still use spaces, whether they be online or offline, to rally around their ideological point of view towards an objective. Digital media had the ability to make a big impact with few resources, utilizing collective rage and sense of issues as a vehicle towards collective participation and advocacy (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2014). Additionally, Gleason (2013) asserts that by using social media platforms during the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Twitter platform provided certain allowances for simultaneous, collective participation and engagement that were not previously afforded to other more traditional movements of the past. Moreover, this online platform also creating space for

many voices to be present and active in the movement's efforts. Through the help of various online resources, more voices can be heard and partake in the forming of a social movement.

A more recent example of online social movements is exemplified through Thrift's (2014) #YesAllWomen event, for instance. This event led to the creation of feminist memes that were ultimately utilized to "mobilize new modes of feminist critique and collectivity" by allowing participants to convey their values and experiences regarding sexism through this unifying hashtag (p. 1092). Additionally, Pond and Lewis's (2017) examination of the 2011 UK riots proved that the "complex, discursive political acts" of this movement and its actors, while dependent on the discursive acts of other actors with clout, gained currency in broader society through the use of hashtags and social media (p. 213). These studies demonstrate the value of social media, allowing a movement to mobilize a form of political efficacy in the mainstream public. Ultimately, citizens realizing their ability to make a difference in online contexts becomes a critical factor in movement origin and survival. Via digital platforms, powerless individuals can collectively leverage their voices to be a more powerful force.

Prominent actors in these spaces still contribute to managing and advancing a movement but in ways that deviate from a traditional focus on leadership. A more contemporary example of this leaderless online movement is the Yellow Vest movement that originated in France in late 2018. Traditional leadership structures as outlined by Simons are not adequate for modern-day movements that operate under "ambiguous borders and advocacy" (Pierce, Styrpejko, & Horne, 2019, p. 17). Additionally, there is a gray area between led and leaderless movements, as ideological cohesion and advocacy are what binds these groups together towards action. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008, p. 74) argue against the previously held notion that "domination is organized by and around one source of power" and instead assert that authority can be

arranged around multiple sources of power. Thus, power and leadership are terms that are changing due to new and emerging technologies that call for adaptation.

Related to the discipline's changing notion of movement leadership are the intertwined concepts of collective and connective action. Collective action is tied to organizational control and focus on a collective identity. Connective action is an affordance of the digital age in which individuals are connected loosely through self-organization on various platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The internet makes connected action possible due to the ability to easily converse and mobilize online.

Scholars also posit interaction between online and offline organization (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). In fact, online action and activism often evolves into offline action. In doing so, digital and social media carry major implications for our political system and organizations due to their ability to connect with people with relative ease (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2014). As Harlow (2011) notes, activism is when a group of like-minded individuals come together and act against the status quo to achieve a desired result. In the digital age, online platforms have enabled activism since Web 2.0 allows for fast and easy communication that is not limited to time, or place (Harlow, 2011). Thanks to digital communications now available to a wide array of actors, citizens relatively easily can become online activists

Take, for example, anti-Colone activism. In 2009, lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg was murdered, and the Guatemalan people blamed President Alvaro Colone for the violent crime. While this movement started locally on Facebook, its aim was to spark outrage and participation globally. This group utilized the platform to achieve its objective, with the goal of bringing Rosenberg's murderer to justice by exposing the political corruptness of the Guatemalan government and its president. By utilizing a Web 2.0 platform to organize their activist work,

this group also was engaged in what Harlow (2011) refers to as “Activism 2.0” (p.227). As outlined by Harlow (2011), Activism 2.0 is when online activism takes to the streets to extend the group’s work. These sorts of movements are important when assessing what makes an online community come together and find its relevance since these interactive platforms arguably foster a perceived sense of shared interests and identity, whether it be political or otherwise, to mobilize and move their ideas forward as a social movement. Indeed, Web 2.0 makes it easier for anyone and everyone, regardless of motives, to mobilize and achieve an objective.

Communal Bonds in Social Movements

Traditionally, community has been associated with face-to-face interaction. From the sociological perspective, communities are groups of people who aim to meet the social needs of participants and share in the collective values of a society (Etzioni, 1996). Additionally, such definitions tend to focus on the geographic proximity, rather than how the members interact regardless of location. However, the internet has made the world smaller. Online communities give spaces for individuals to converse about ideas, form bonds, and even mobilize for action. In the 1980s, this notion was especially apparent on one of the earliest conceptions of an online community or social media platform: The WELL. Rheingold (2012) asserts these online spaces can act as a real community in which online socializing and discourse lead to a sense of comradery. Thus, the use of these platforms can build strong cyber communities, complete with a sense of cohesion and shared identity. This ultimately leads to a sense of oneness and reliance on one another since the “the very existence of [community] rests in the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence” (Tönnies, 1988, p. 69). Thus, the notion that online communities and offline communities are separate entities is not necessarily true. The belongingness associated with a community can lead to larger

organizational practices and sense of vision that can mark itself as a movement that seeks to further an agenda in online contexts.

Since online platforms are a resource in which individuals can voice their opinions and share in identity-building, this allows for a greater facilitating of conversation about various issues and ideas that concern a group of people. On these platforms, individuals can develop their “civic identity and express their political stances” through varying forms of expression (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018, p. 76). Individuals may even be more compelled to share their ideas due the freedom of expression that this technology affords. Online, individuals can feel appreciated for their contributions and affirmed for content that they share and produce, thus creating a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, the creation and sharing of content ultimately leads to the formation of information neighborhoods in which citizens can easily view and contribute to a movement’s efforts (Gleason, 2013; Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011). Such a culture, developed in an online space, ultimately allows for a sense of affinity to develop and contribute to the organization and strength of a social movement.

These online spaces thrive off others participating, voicing their opinions, creating content, etc. It is only through consistent engagement that the community stays relevant and can call members to action when necessary. This can allow for greater collaboration to take place to create a better future based on the need for the participatory give-and-take featured in these online contexts, giving participants the ability to “reimagine the political” (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018, p. 91). Thus, the building and mobilizing of online movements allows actors to gain stake in the political system.

Yet this begs some questions: Who is doing the reimagining? Are the actors who drive constant participation of others to be trusted? These networked social movements act as a

“coalition relying on internet technologies” and are reflective of the cultural values of the people who use them (Harlow, 2011, p. 228). Massanari (2017) asserts that due to the ease of user interaction and creation and furthering of offensive content, these online spaces allow for “toxic technocultures” to form and exist. This culture usually surrounds an event or issue on “sociotechnical networks”, like 4chan and Reddit, and “often relies on othering of those perceived as outside the culture,” (Massanari, 2017, p. 333). Actors involved in these seemingly leaderless communities do not *need* to always agree on their shared vision of the community or the culture *per se*, but rather can coalesce around amorphous concepts of masculinity or superiority as a form of rationality for their actions.

In sum, the internet has undoubtedly changed the landscape for social movements. However, there are parallels between how they once functioned and the way that they function now. Social-movement actors are able to easily interact and mobilize as a collective force around their goal in the digital age. This contrasts with the previous focus on leadership and its relationship to movement success. Web 2.0 ultimately makes leaderless movements possible because relatively equal individuals can find common ground and plan within these spaces.

While many scholars have focused on the positive effects of technology on social movements (Gleason, 2013; Thrift, 2014; Pond & Lewis, 2017), there is another side to online organizing. Specifically, Marwick and Lewis (2017), Marwick and Caplan (2017), Massanari (2015, 2017), and Eddington (2018, 2020) have noted the increase in far-right/ alt-right mobilization in online contexts. These studies examined online communities, groups, and hashtags to determine the ways in which online organizing and engagement can produce troubling results. Additionally, while many of these studies focus on the influence of events and discourse that took place on the platform Reddit, these studies assert that online spaces allow its

actors to produce counter-narratives that often portray their identity and/or ideology as a minority in danger of some form of social, status-quo extinction. This ultimately allows for a toxic ideology to flourish, with many online actors seeing their actions as noble or necessary.

Thus far and in contrast, 4chan and /pol/, specifically, have received little attention in the scholarship. Scholars including Sparsby (2017), Ludemann (2018), Papasavva et al. (2020), and Zannettou et al. (2017) have examined the discourse and images featured on discussion boards including 4chan's /b/ and /pol/ via differing methodological frameworks. Sparsby (2017) and Ludemann (2018) conducted their analyses by examining the linguistic and discursive elements at play in the rhetoric on /b/ and /pol/, and state that there are clear collective, disruptive values at play on these boards, with aggressive memetic images often aiming to convey their brand of insular rhetoric. While Papasavva et al. (2020), and Zannettou et al. (2017) utilized a quantitative framework to determine the toxicity scores and the most popularly mentioned entities within posts on 4chan. These studies forward the notion that these communities are often successful in marshaling alternative or fake news to mainstream platforms such as Twitter, and the posts often feature rather toxic, alt-right memes and language. Yet this begs the question, as Papasavva et al. (2020) aptly posit: what is the nature of discussion on the board *following* sharing of news articles? In other words, how do users understand their strategic successes, or do they even see their communication as strategic?

Additionally, these works do not address the intersection of political communication, social movements, and alt-right mobilization in online spaces. To Papasavva's point, there is a need for interpretive analyses that examine the sentiments, strategizing, and political-participation tactics that arise from online social movements in these alt-right online spaces. These aforementioned studies have given us a tentative view of how dark-side online groups can

be influential, but interpretive frameworks such as rhetorical criticism consider how online actors use and assign meaning to words, thus illuminating their worldview (Burke, 1966).

/Pol/ and others demonstrate that it is naïve to presume that technology use for collective or connective action is always normatively desirable. Indeed, social movements can effectively be formed online with great success, but perhaps there is a price to pay for this ease. As Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) point out, social movement actors might not be disenfranchised but nevertheless fall prey to the claims of others, thus drawing them into movements. McNamee, Peterson, and Peña (2010) advance the study of online hate-group communication by examining the common communicative elements featured in their rhetoric to illustrate their ability to “reinforce the hate group’s identity” and “recruit new members” (p. 257, 277). To that end, Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang (2003) suggests that “the Internet may be an especially powerful tool for extremists as a means of reaching an international audience, recruiting members, linking diverse extremist groups, and allowing maximum image control” (p. 29). Thus, online spaces can create rhetoric that can build on existing though isolated sentiments in a community while also expanding their sphere of influence. Yet currently, there is little scholarship that addresses the potential impact that these new digital avenues afford political participation or its impact on institutional politics.

Political Participation

Political participation and collective action are concepts largely associated with democracy. However, the mythos of democracy and actual democratic participation often conflict. Citizens tend to believe that “democratic government is self-government,” in that they can choose what gets vetoed and what does not; in other words, democracy is at their whim and favor (Parvin & Saunders, 2018). In reality, political participation in pluralistic democracies is

meant to allow people to voice their opinions and make themselves heard but not necessarily give them their preferred policy options.

Currently, Web 2.0 users have the ability now more than ever to use online contexts to exert significant political influence. Political actors from unlikely places can be validated by their peers and jumpstart a movement by simply using these technologies to their advantages. Loader (2008, p. 1922) suggests that “feelings of solidarity with like-minded actors” creates a sense of identity and mobilizes a group of people towards action. Houston et al. (2013) suggests that online action, such as tweeting during the 2012 presidential candidate debates, can shape citizen attitudes and allow a greater breadth of citizens to get involved in the political domain. Moreover, this online interactivity acts as a form of political engagement that makes citizens feel more invested in the political process (Houston et al. 2013). The notion of e-democracy is not limited to social-media platforms either, since Wright (2015) asserts that online petitions can engage citizens as well. The ‘success’ of these petitions may not produce change in tangible, policy changes but instead showcases the democratic innovation of these online spaces and its actors (Wright, 2015). Thus, these platforms allow for greater citizen involvement due to the ability to converse easily with like-minded individuals who wish to use their skillset towards a political end.

Previously, scholars focused on how the backgrounds of individuals can influence political agency and efficacy due to various social advantages and disadvantages, such as education or income, that are at play. Living in a politically active community where one can learn what political action looks like and how to engage in political discourse exacerbates the participation divide. Beaumont (2011) asserts that political learning can empower disadvantaged individuals. This would create a more level playing field instead of a system of political elites

who have been entitled to such a privilege based on background alone, allowing more individuals to participate, and has the potential to create a richer conversation due to varied participants (Beaumont, 2011). While privilege and political power often go together, online technologies can disrupt this relationship to some degree by offering a platform for silenced or disadvantaged political actors to voice their opinions freely.

Additionally, the literature suggests that online platforms allow for citizens who were not previously inclined to participate or considered influential actors a venue to get involved. For example, in Mali, West Africa, in 2012, there was a rise in jihadist and rebel power. Nomads and urbanites used online platforms in a time of crisis, which allowed “new dynamics of political agency” to form, re-shaping what agency can look like in online spaces for those who are in dire situations without an active political voice (De Bruijn, Pelckmans, & Sangare, 2015, p. 111). Political actors are ultimately people who see problems existing in the world and want to tackle and resolve them; these actors use their skills to “characterize the political domain” (Loader, 2008, p. 1926). Thus, in this case, online participation shifted the conceptions of what political agency could provide to actors, regardless of their clout, or lack thereof in society.

Digital platforms allow citizens to inform, persuade, and mobilize one another towards a political end. Himmelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham, and Sweetser (2012) state that Web 2.0 platforms are an increasingly favored space for citizens to engage in political communication compared to traditional media. Online, persons can effectively align themselves with interest groups, causes, or community per their liking, and in doing so they straddle the traditional divide between private, interpersonal communication and civic, rhetorical messaging. Himmelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham, and Sweetser (2012) state that not only are these platforms a way for citizens to feel

involved but also suggest “that online identity reflects offline identity” (as cited in Baym, 2004).² The interpersonal communication in these spaces influences identity formation that “can also extend into social action in both online and offline through responses to social problems by cultivation and galvanization of social action and activism in communities” (Eddington, 2019, p. 37). Thus, online and offline identities constructed by these actors in these spaces influence each other.

When considering the relevance of interpersonal relations regarding online political communication, the role of online identity has largely been overlooked. Digital rhetorics such as memes and hashtags rely heavily on expressions of shared identity in which a social movement can “define their collective sense of self, who they are, and what they stand for” (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015, p. 865). The use of memetic images to make points, for instance, contributes to how a movement lands on who they are due to this collective crafting of what they want their movement to say and be. It is in these online spaces that “participation and engagement become highly flexible and personalized” (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015, p. 867). Gerbaudo and Treré (2015, p. 867) suggest that a digital collective identity coalesces around “how collectives constitute themselves as actors.”

Additionally, due to the easily accessible nature of social media, available spaces in which citizens can communicate about politics has expanded exponentially. Admittedly, many people avoid online discourse due to fear of harassment (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2017). Nevertheless, other people *do* take advantage of new political-communication venues afforded by digital media, despite the threat. Signing online petitions, searching for information, and

² Therefore, Koch’s (2005) notion that online activities or conversations online do not carry real-world relevance or lead to democratic outcomes, as asserted by previous scholars, is untenable when considering how the online and offline identity converge to influence political outcomes.

commenting on the day's news are actions reflective of the way in which citizens act in their section of the online sphere. Thus, online democratic practice is capable of existing in these spaces.

Nevertheless, Koch (2005) asserts that the internet has failed citizens in the ability to ethically construct a proper means of communicating in a public space to uphold the values of democracy. The internet has ultimately created passive political agents who are unable to engage in a meaningful dialogue amongst other participants due to its design (Koch, 2005). Thus, according to Koch's (2005) argument, the internet is unable to engage the public in a true dialogue due to its one-way communication model and does not lead to a collective sense of political involvement. Additionally, Koch (2005) illustrates that for democracy to exist and be furthered in a productive manner, it must exist in a real space to tackle real problems. In sum, the internet is a place where political artifacts reside but where no real discourse or change can be produced.

But contrary to Koch (2005), Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018), and Lutz and Hoffman (2014) showcase that discourse online can take place and can lead to offline action with results. These studies found that online spaces allow citizens to partake in civic conversations that can empower their sense of political self and provide a place for participatory practices to occur. The agency realized from online participation is inherently connected to a growing number of confident, self-organizing users emerging in these spaces (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018). Thus, interacting in online spaces allows for individuals to influence and partake in political outcomes, which is inherently a democratic practice.

Likewise, memes allow for more active participation in online communities. While memes are a form of one-way communication, they circulate the internet and ultimately imbed

themselves into the general discourse beyond online. This form of communication, or memetic communication, illuminates how /pol/, for example, influenced both their own users and the mainstream in 2016 since they were influential in political alt-right circles that encouraged a particular toxic agenda (Hatewatch, 2018, par. 1). Sparby (2017) asserts that memetic communication is a form of “users behavior” and acts as a “memetic recapitulation of how other users have historically behaved” in these spaces or a representation of these users’ behaviors that “imitate or present only slightly altered versions of what they think is the appropriate way to act” (p. 86). If /pol/ users are engaging with one another to achieve their objective, then they are not passive political agents, as Koch suggests. Instead, these users utilize various modes of communication in order to assert their influence.

However, more political communication does not necessarily imply more democracy. Specifically in the case of online hate groups, is expression democratic when the intent is to harm the *demos*? Does the online world yield democratic results at all? By the same token, the internet arguably has the ability to undermine democratic practices since the ethics of online platform use is evolving. This also suggests that democratic participation is also changing since it does not need to take place in an offline space to have a real impact. Online participation is a form of participation, and the contribution it enables is very real. If individuals feel compelled to participate in political acts online, they will and may also realize the weight of their rhetorical influence in the process. But if others are marginalized in these spaces or denied equality before the law thanks to the political activity in some dark-side groups, can we say that democratic participation has been advanced?

In sum, current online practices are changing the way activism and political participation play out in online and offline contexts. The internet and its platforms reach many, which makes it

easier for citizens to contribute to public debate. Thus, there is a tension between broadening political participation and the effects that it may produce. While online communities and platforms may encourage persons who previously did not participate to do so, it also allows individuals the opportunity to misuse that technology and their newly actualized sense of influence.

Challenges for Scholarship and Online Political Participation

Most notably, from this review we learn that social media speeds organizing across geographical boundaries; allows persons with similar affinities to support each other in online communities; broadens opportunities for political participation; and leverages social identities to build movements. But much remains unclear: What is to stop socially destructive movements from organizing online? Are online communities and broadened political participation unconditional goods? And what are the implications of shared social identity being so central to political rhetoric?

These troubling questions are exactly the challenges /pol/ poses. As an online community, /pol/ re-shaped what political agency could look like in the online sphere; they produced a distinct counterculture of their own design. We therefore must ask: What drove /pol/'s sense of agency surrounding their discourse and actions, and what does this say about the future of political participation and social movements?

Answering this research question will provide insights that will help others address the scholarly, policy, and ethical dilemmas presented by /pol/ and similar groups. Most immediately, scholars need to better understand the political motives of those who organize for socially disruptive or harmful ends. Regarding policy, should there be regulation on this type of communicative participation? What would that look like? Lastly, this group poses an ethical

dilemma regarding how individuals interpersonally interact in online contexts. How should people interact in online contexts? How are we impacted by these interactions? The proposed study speaks to these dilemmas by uncovering the worldview of /pol/ users.

Chapter 3 - Scope and Means of Analysis

To better understand /pol/'s 2016 political advocacy, this thesis analyzes threads and posts from /pol/'s discussion board from May 2016 to August 2017. Since 4chan's threads and posts are present on the main site for a limited time, this thesis considered the archived threads featured on the /pol/ board on 4pleb.org³. I rhetorically analyzed the discourse featured on this board to determine what posters' language choices indicated about their understanding of political participation as well as their political agency. Toward this end, I conducted a cluster analysis of these texts, adopting Burke's concept of motives, to examine the appeals this group utilized. Using these means, I sought to discover how users on /pol/ understand the world, politics, and their own place in both. Doing so allows me to draw conclusions that inform online social activism, democratic political participation, and the dark side of both. In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework and probes used in my reading, as well as the texts selected for analysis.

Critical Means

Borrowing from Burke's method of cluster criticism, this thesis aims to understand "the meanings that key symbols have for a rhetor. . .by charting symbols that cluster around those key symbols in an artifact" (Foss, 2018, p. 63). Burke's conception of rhetoric suggests that human agents use words to "induce actions in other human agents" (1969, p. 41). A cluster analysis's objective is to examine an artifact to understand what acts, ideas, and images align with one another to gain insight into the rhetor's "worldview that may or may not be known to the rhetor" (Foss, 2018, p. 63). The keywords and its cluster terms allow the critic to interpret what kinds of

³ <https://archive.4plebs.org/>

ideas and arguments are being produced around these clusters, and, thereby, to determine the rhetor's fundamental point of view.

Keywords are often nouns and a key term's relevance is determined based on the critic's assessment of frequency and intensity that it appears. In contrast, cluster, sometimes also called associated, terms can be nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Foss (1984) operationalizes frequency as repetition, while intensity captures the emotional charge exuded within the discourse or idea surrounding the rhetoric. Additionally, while cluster terms may often appear in the same sentence as a keyword, it is possible that cluster terms may also appear in sentences situated in close proximity to the discourse surrounding that particular keyword (Foss, 2018). For example, /pol/ users replying to a message that contained a keyword under examination. These clusters, the keywords, and cluster terms ultimately offer a view into the story of reality that the rhetor forwards.

Additionally, this thesis utilizes other Burkean concepts to interpret group discourse. Burke (1969) asserts that critics examine the ways in which human beings are classified into groups, and it is through process of identification and division that individuals find themselves at odds with one another. Thus, this sense of separating from some serves to reinforce identification with others. Individuals "form selves or identities through various properties," whether through friends, activities, mores, etc. (Foss, 2018, p. 61). Through these identities, there is a process in which associations and allegiance forms, while also serving to separate associations with other individuals with whom they do not identify. Burke defines consubstantiality as the way in which substances, or rather the attitudes and ideas, allow for identification to exist (1969, p. 20-24). Rhetorical artifacts ultimately provide insight into ideas, emotions, and values and the critic with orientation to a situation or rhetorical act under examination (Foss, 2018). Thus, a rhetorical

critic's observations of an artifact are ultimately insights based on the rhetoric, or more specifically, the codebook of various terms they are provided with by the rhetors.

Thus, the rhetoric of any rhetor or group of rhetors gives insight into the ways in which the individuals ultimately "size up situations," while also providing a rather revealing look into those individuals' sentiments (Foss, 2018, p. 62). To that end, terministic screens through which individuals view their reality ultimately shape how they react to that reality as well (Burke, 1969). However, terministic screens are rarely, if ever, perfectly shared. While individuals may sense that they are consubstantial with one another through the process of identification, their experiences are different. By accounting for what terms and words go with what, the critic learns about the rhetor's perspective, regardless of whether the terms used were "deliberate or spontaneous" (Burke, 1966, p. 47; see also Foss, 2018). While /pol/'s motives are unclear, the notion that this group sought to engage in political action through the recognition of this identification process is plausible.

The use of cluster criticism and attentiveness identification appeals allows this study to gain insight into /pol/'s worldview by studying the discourse available and deriving meaning from the ideas and arguments made from the rhetors. This criticism allowed me to interpret /pol/'s reality by examining specific word usage, associations, and the frequency and intensity in which these words occur. The terministic screens through which individuals view reality constitute how individuals convey that reality; words offer context. Thus, the words that these rhetors used is relevant when trying to better understand their perspective and the way that these agents used words to move one another towards action.

Toward this end, I drew on Foss's (1984) application of cluster criticism, in which she focuses on associational terms and words. In it, Foss reads Angelicin documents on accepting

women into the priesthood, focusing on terms and their associational terms to better understand the implicit ideas underlying these words. Additionally, Foss's artifacts as well as my own address group identity. This analysis created a framework and provided inspiration towards a concise, yet thorough analysis of the key terms, cluster terms, and the network of meaning that arises around these words. Ultimately, cluster criticism affords the critic insight into the rhetor's worldview and "the process and motivation for the events and actions that occurred" (Foss, 1984, p.3). Specifically, I analyzed discourse appearing on certain dates.

Analytic Scope

This thesis will examine three pivotal dates between 2016 and 2017 to interpret the community's discourse regarding their unstated assumptions about politics and participation. Posts were collected from one, 24-hour period on these featured dates. On May 3, 2016, when Trump became the presumed Republican nominee, the search yielded 121,577 posts. As the first day of Trump's candidacy as the GOP nominee, /pol/ users could now rally around the candidate without distraction or question. On November 8, 2016, this search produced 431,831 results. This date was selected since it was the day in which /pol/ users could effectively participate in the democratic process and exercise their voting rights, thus offering better insight into their worldview. On August 11, 2017, which marked the Charlottesville rallies, this search produced 120,802 results. This date was selected since it may illuminate what "[uniting] the right" meant to those who supported its message and formation.

Average length of these messages are varied, some are several paragraphs, while others were a few sentences or a single word; it varied based on the context of the thread, the message that the user or users produced, and what kinds of appeals are being made. Ultimately, some threads gained more traction than others across these dates. Since the messages are largely

produced by anonymous users it is not possible to track who said what; instead, my analysis will be concerned with what was said within these messages and how.

With more than half a million posts collected on these three dates, I needed to focus my reading without missing patterns that emerge from banal, everyday use of language. While it would be easier to limit my search to the first several pages of any date, this study aims to better understand /pol/'s shared worldview from the threads and posts based on the frequency and intensity of key terms that arise across the broadest section of discourse possible. I also could have attended to the most egregious examples in the posts, but, this would result in a reading more about the users' attempts to perform a role or attract attention than about their unstated assumptions. To reveal unstated worldview, I needed to attend to the mundane as well as the exceptional (and at times exceptionally profane). Therefore, I reviewed all the collected posts, watching for repeated words to find key terms, then focusing my attention on what words appeared around key terms and why.

Thus, by reading the discourse in a single thread, keywords and cluster terms became apparent. In Chapter two, the aforementioned studies regarding 4chan and /pol/ were done largely from a quantitative lens, thus presenting a need for more interpretive approaches that are capable of providing a look at /pol/ users' sentiments and their political worldview. Thus, analysis will be guided by the words /pol/ users use and how the keywords and its clusters appear in the discourse itself in order to better inform our conceptions of their collective worldview by examining a lexicon of broad, yet diverse discourse/texts, rather than selecting the most popular, offensive, etc. threads and posts available.

Ultimately, this analysis seeks to read /pol/'s posts to understand how members make sense of the world, politics, and their place in both while also considering the democratic

ramifications of this group's political organizing. To do so, I analyzed these archived texts to identify the keywords and cluster terms that arise most predominantly to better illuminate the worldview of /pol/. To that end, this thesis aims to understand how this group mobilized and realized their own sense of agency through the political movement they helped shape. I found a clear pattern of increasing sophistication among those posting on these dates. In the next chapter, I detail the story of political identity and action as revealed by the clusters.

Chapter 4 - Just for Keks or the Evolution of a Movement?:

Analysis of /Pol/'s Discourse

This thesis has focused on 4chan's /pol/ and relevant literature regarding social movements and political participation. This creates a foundation on which to analyze /pol/'s discourse during the 2016 presidential election. More specifically, this chapter aims to analyze the keywords and associational cluster terms from the archived /pol/ threads across three relevant dates to reveal the posters' worldview in relation to political agency and political participation.

On the day Donald Trump became the presumed Republican nominee, three key terms arose: Trump, Hillary, and MAGA. /Pol/ users present Donald Trump as a larger-than-life figure, a God or an emperor as many users refer to him, who could beat Hillary Clinton in the upcoming election. However, their discourse indicates that he needs some help: their help. The conception of what it means to Make America Great Again to /pol/ users seems in its infancy on this date. However, they indicate that Trump is the key to the next chapter of America and Clinton needs to be defeated. Their political movement's objective is to Make America Great Again with the help of Trump. Through appeals for traditional, participatory tactics, they assert that they can work together over the next several months to win the election. The clusters suggest that they believe if they create memes, vote, and mobilize sympathetic anon comrades that they will defeat Hillary Clinton, make Donald Trump president, and finally Make American Great Again. /Pol/ users' campaigning for Trump will unlock MAGA's potential, they believe.

Fast forward to election day, and three key terms emerge: Trump/Kek, Voting, and MAGA. /Pol/ users identify which peoples should be 'kept out' behind the wall that Trump has promised to create and who are the beneficiaries. Their discourse suggests that MAGA means promoting an exclusively white, American identity. The keywords and cluster terms also suggest

that users believe that both Trump and /pol/ had a destiny to fulfill on this day. When some /pol/ users admit that they did not vote, others shame them, stating that their lack of education and stupidity could cost Trump and /pol/ the election. Their collective efforts in encouraging each other to vote for Trump, as well as their excoriation of those who do not, illuminates their unstated assumption that voting is what can truly MAGA. This is a classic expression of political participation and was utilized on this platform to remind their movement of the influence that their collective votes have the potential to hold. By the end of the night, /pol/'s sense of political agency has now developed into a more self-aware sense of political influence, since users realize that they are powerful and that their candidate, Donald Trump can Make America Great Again...for them.

Finally, on the day of the Charlottesville rallies, two key terms emerge: Unite the Right and White. Almost a year after the election, /pol/ users are no longer spilling digital ink in praise of Trump. In fact, he is not mentioned much at all. Instead, /pol/'s discourse indicates that, for some, the identity of "Nazi" is pivotal, with an abundance of Nazi visual symbols, including flags and regalia. The white identity is a tenet of the continuation of their political movement, and their sense of political agency is now realized; they do not indicate a propriety for limits in what they can do; rather, they see the need to make their ideas known because they refuse to be "replaced." With threads dedicated to ongoing chats and plans on other platforms and forums for the rallies, their alignment with the alt-right identity and the way that they engage with traditional, political participation tactics may appear to be status quo for their standards, but their sense of agency around what they can accomplish has changed.

The discourse across these three dates suggests that the relationship with Trump and the rallying cry of MAGA evolved. It became a political force that no longer needed to be attached

to Trump *per se*, but rather attached to the American, white identity. Politics becomes much more than Trump. It is beyond MAGA. /Pol/'s sense of agency developed around the realization that they can incite change and are influential in creating rhetoric that simultaneously supports their agenda and makes an impact. The election created space beyond their platform for their agenda to materialize; they can see it in the mainstream now. In these online spaces, this can allow for a wide array of ideals to grow and illuminates the benefits and drawbacks of political participation and movements in an online context. This chapter will analyze the clusters that arose on these three days to showcase the evolution of /pol/ as political actors and their worldview.

Keywords and Cluster Terms

Day 1: Donald Trump Becomes Presumed Republican Nominee

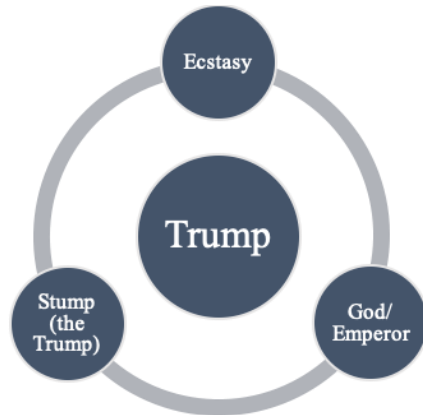


Figure 4.1 Trump Cluster

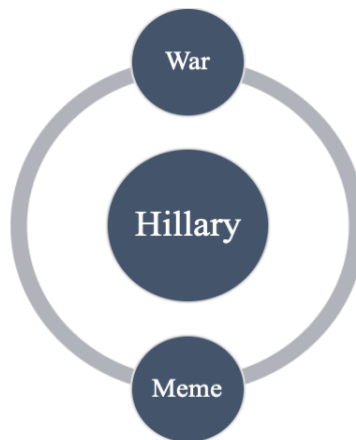


Figure 4.2. Hillary Cluster



Figure 4.3. MAGA Cluster

Day 2: Election Day

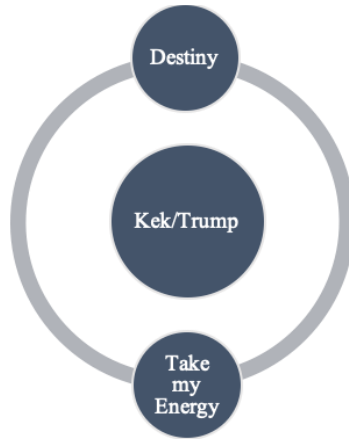


Figure 4.4. Kek/Trump Cluster

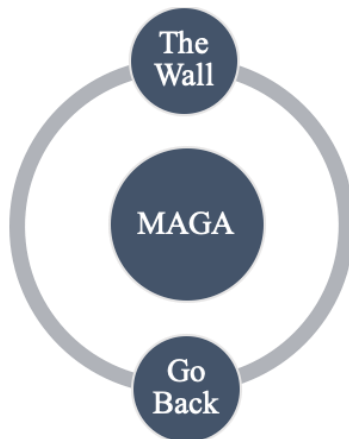


Figure 4.5. MAGA Cluster

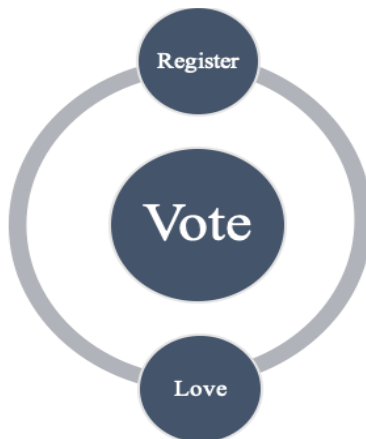


Figure 4.6. Vote Cluster

Day 3: Day One of Charlottesville Rallies

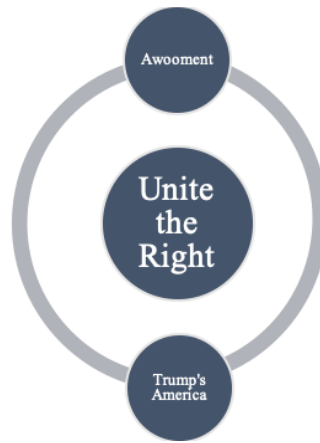


Figure 4.7. Unite the Right Cluster

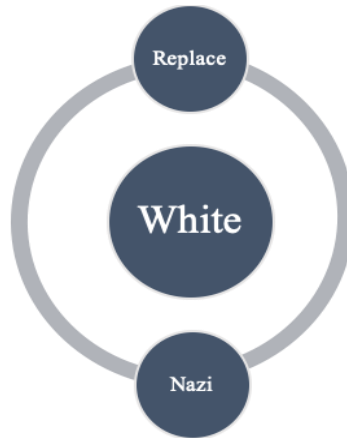


Figure 4.8. White Cluster

May 3rd, 2016: Donald Trump Becomes Presumed Republican Nominee

The day that Donald Trump becomes the Republican nominee provides insight into /pol/'s worldview and traditional campaigning tactics through the analysis of this day's keywords and cluster terms. The first keyword "Trump" provides three surrounding cluster terms: Stump, God/Emperor, and Ecstasy (see Figure 4.1). The second keyword "Hillary" provides two surrounding cluster terms: War and Meme (see Figure 4.2). Finally, the third keyword "MAGA" provides two surrounding cluster terms: The Wall and Awooment (see Figure 4.3).

Trump

On this day, the keyword "Trump" occurs with high frequency and intensity when examining the available discourse. In numerous threads, regardless of the size of replies, users often chant "Trump" in some fashion. There is a large amount of repetition with this keyword and the users often rely on the use of all caps when simply referring to the presidential candidate, for example: "TRUMP!". In some threads, many users do not have much to add in terms of smart or relevant discourse around the candidate's presumed clinching of the Republican nomination. /Pol/ now has expressed interest in Trump as the Republican nominee and this keyword suggests the beginning of their journey with him. The parody of the Kek religion points to the following that Trump has commanded amongst these users. Moreover, their words indicate their willingness to follow and support Trump as more than a man, but as a God. /Pol/'s sense of political agency is in its early stages, but their discourse suggests a willingness to support Trump as a political figure who they perceive as entertaining but also worth rallying around.

On this day, the cluster term/phrase "Stump" appears. The words that are used both with and around this keyword and cluster term in various posts carry pop cultural significance, suggesting that Trump is a relevant actor in their new form of pop cultural amusement. More

importantly, this cluster term suggests that they view Trump as an unbeatable figure; a man that cannot be stopped or “stumped”. Through references to DMX and Queen lyrics, as well as Trump’s newfound level of celebrity, /pol/ users suggest that they see this as relevant to their message and their base; it is a part of their shtick. Users want to experience Trump as the reality star that he is and “NEED NEW CANT STUMP THE TRUMP EPISODE NOW!”; /pol/ users want to see more. Trump provides a level of entertainment and one user suggests states that they’re feeling “ali-i-i-iiiiive” and are “having a good time” watching him and his rise in political relevance. The full set of lyrics surround both Trump and suggested enthusiasm for his policies as exemplified through this song format:

Tonight, I'm gonna [sic] have myself, a real good time

I feel ali-i-i-iiiiive [sic]

And the polls, turning inside out, yeah

I'm floating around, in ecstasy

So don't, stump me now

Don't stump me now

Cause I'm having a good time, having a good time

I'm a businessman leaping through the skies

Like a tiger, defying the laws and policies

I'm the GOP nominee, raised high, like DJ Khaled

We're gonna [sic] win, win, win

There's no stopping me

I'm cutting through the lies, yeah
Ten and a half feet
That's what we call the wall heiiiiiiight [sic]
I'm crushing nominees at the speed of light
I WANNA MAKE A MOVEMENT WITH AWOOOOOOOO

Don't stump me now
I'm having such a great time
We're building the wall
Dont [sic] stump me now
If you wanna [sic] have a great time
Just gimme [sic] the wall

By parodying the “Don’t Stop Me Now” stanza for their Trump-centric lyrics, users bridge pop culture and politics. The connection suggest that Trump’s campaign is a form of entertainment in which they pull the strings; they can oversee its prosperity as easily as they could oversee its downfall. However, /pol/’s discourse also indicates that they want to keep the momentum going by seeing the new “episodes” play out with their help. These posts almost function as a wink to fellow users and outsiders that some realize that Trump is little more than a meme and a pop-cultural fascinator. By producing these long, calculated posts in which they insert him and his policies into existing pieces of pop culture, users indicate that Trump, more than any other candidate, deserves to be the centerpiece of a song and their political gaze. In fact, Trump is “GIVE IT TO YA” and Trump is “GON DELIVER TO YA” a better America. These plays on established songs serve to unite and enthuse them around the candidate further.

Additionally, cluster terms “God” and “Emperor” are prevalent. While these cluster terms might appear amusing or funny, users often refer to Trump as their “God” or reference their praise for the deity Kek; such words carrying religious connotations based on their delivered and suggested meanings. Not to be confused with the 4chan term ‘Kek’ that is slang for ‘lol’, the cult of Kek, a satirical religion/cult started on 4chan, began when a user stated that Kek was another word for an Egyptian frog god. While this may be incorrect, the term got coined all the same and Pepe and Trump became synonymous with the religion of Kek (Neiwert, 2017). On /pol/, Kek is seen as the God of the religion and Trump is seen as the Jesus-like figure of the religion, however, /pol/ frequently uses both terms somewhat interchangeably.

By Trump receiving the Republican nomination, it was as if Trump became their “GOD EMPEROR” confirmed. Both terms suggest a powerful, larger than life being. Trump being associated with both terms in these archived posts illuminates a sense of awe and perception of worthiness to worship and/or follow due to his labeled status. Additionally, images of Pepe wearing Egyptian emperor garb on top of a throne with the words “Praise Kek” were also prominent on this day. These memes and words of praise serve as further reminders of Trump acting as a God-like figure, while also suggesting alt-right undertones of this religion based on Pepe the Frog’s prominence in some of the Kek memes. Users praise Trump not only in words but also images. In many religions, there are symbols, figures, and images of important figures that followers can worship, and the religion of Kek is no different. The memes reinforce the importance of the worship of Kek.

Moreover, the imagery associated with “eternity” is not only in line with traditional religious sentiments of abiding by a God for a lifetime until the end of days, but also alludes to a parallel between the religious elements of their rhetoric and their future action on behalf of

Trump. /Pol/'s willingness to show Trump support and stand by him in the months leading up to the election shows their dedication to Trump as a God; in this case, election day *will* be judgement day. This creation and the following that the Kek religion has been garnering on this day suggests that Trump will be upheld as their God until they can do no more for him and on his behalf.

On this day, the cluster term “ecstasy” also appears. Additionally, the term “joy” appears around the keyword Trump on this date. The archived text also suggests that there is clear excitement erupting from users on this day through their word choices. These word choices convey that there is not only a sense of awe around the notion that Trump is the Republican candidate, but also what his candidacy can bring to the future of the country going forward. /Pol/ users saw this as a “moment” to take in; in this moment they are “ECSTATIC!!!RILED UP!!!SPEECHLESS!!!” over Trump’s candidacy while watching the coverage, providing them with the same level of excitement and “feels” that “new parents have when they hold their child for the very first time.” /Pol/'s discourse suggests that they see Trump as the vehicle for change and the notion that the candidate they have been supporting has a chance at the Presidency is “too much joy” for their “soul to take”. This first win for Trump suggests that users are joyous and understand now what Trump was saying when his supporters would “get sick of winning.” It would make their hopes for a meme President a reality and provide a win for them as supporters and the country they wish to alter.

By incorporating elements of pop culture and religious imagery /pol/ suggests a sense of both amusement and awe surrounding Trump and his candidacy. For other supporters of campaigns in contrast to Trump’s, this may seem strange, but this is a part of what makes Trump an appealing candidate to /pol/. This cluster is delivered in a bit of a tongue-in-cheek manner

with the imagery and word choices that they utilize, but their word choices also suggest a fervor for Trump. /Pol/'s rhetoric suggests that Trump is a figure that deserves prominence and cannot be taken down no matter how much others oppose him. Their blind praise of the candidate and his policies to come suggests that they see Trump as a larger than life, God-like figure that they want to watch play out because they find it exciting and joy-inducing. Additionally, the language seen in the archived posts on this date serve as reminders to the people who support Trump on this board that there is a clear sense of commitment to not letting him get “stumped” or stopped by anyone, and to celebrate his rise to the nomination, even if it is shown through the most basic form of acknowledgement and praise of: “TRUMP!”.

Hillary

This keyword centers on /pol/'s collective efforts to defeat Hillary Clinton in the upcoming election. The threads I analyzed detail /pol/'s plans to rally their base towards action against Clinton. This keyword serves to encourage /pol/ users, as political actors, to ask their fellow users to participate in traditional campaigning and strategizing tactics in their combat against Clinton. The cluster terms suggest that /pol/'s agency resides within strategizing and developing campaign messages and memes to help Trump win the presidency as his self-appointed soldiers.

On this day, the cluster term “war” emerges. There are many calls for users to engage in a “war” with Hillary, with vivid words and phrases that are utilized to suggest that a war is inevitable and necessary for Trump’s rise to the presidency. Users saw this night as their first victory, but they knew that there was much more that they had to do in the coming months. Users call upon their “brothers in Trump” to “eat well” tonight, for “Tommorrow [sic] we go to war for Kek and the God Emperoro [sic]”. With terms such as “army” and “swords”, /pol/ users invite

each other to gather their “army” for “the final strike on Hilary,” asking “ARE YOU WITH ME /POL?!?!?”. Imagery of raising their “SWORDS” to “CHARGE THE FRONT GATES” to defeat the “HARPY KNOWN AS HIARY [sic] CLINTON” suggests a crusade on behalf of Trump. Others beg to know when they will “FINALLY START THE WAR ON HILLARY?”. Users present themselves as soldiers in Trump’s war and speculate that he is “signaling” them to keep creating influential memes and messages to influence “internet savvy voters”; calling for everyone to “Tweet stuff at Trump until he RTs it, spread it on social media in any way you can...”. They need to create content “around the clock” and must not get “complacent” in this fight in order to be victorious.

Another term that clusters around the keyword of Hillary is “meme”. While this may be an unsurprising find in the online space that has proven influential in their meme-making abilities, this cluster term represents more than mere images of Hillary or speaking about any Hillary meme in particular. Instead, users are developing a strategy to uses memes against Hillary in their war. A /pol/ user states that a meme cannot be “forced,” but they are “good at this shit” because they “keep moving” and keep the content going; they make memes at the “right moment,” without seeming “manufactured.” Such self-awareness indicates that they also implicitly view themselves as efficacious in campaigning for Trump. With calls for “a flow of pro-Trump” and “anti-Shillary [sic]” memes, users state that every Hillary meme needs to be literally “CROOKED” to portray a “synergy with Trump's linguistic killshot [sic].” /Pol/ users are ultimately advocating for a “NEED TO MEME SHILLARY OUT OF EXISTENCE” and into “oblivion.” /Pol/ users ask for collective input as to how to mobilize action and defeat Hillary with the use of memes. If they work some “MEME MAGIC” on Clinton’s African-American and LGBT voter base, they can get them to “defect” and turn against her to win the

“war.” More generally, users state it is imperative to turn Clinton’s base against her, thereby making Trump’s voter base stronger by weakening Clinton’s. They believe that they must “start doing our part to make america [sic] great again” by creating these memes against “crooked hillary [sic]” “NOW”.

4chan’s memes are historically influential. In fact, according to Beran (2017), 4chan created the meme model we know today; one of the few places one could spot one was originally on 4chan. /Pol/’s rhetoric suggests that they believe that to defeat Clinton, they must get their memes out to the general populace and for those memes to be well-received and resonate with Trump’s base beyond /pol/ in order to win the “war”. This cluster term points to /pol/ seeing the need to broaden their focus beyond themselves to be victorious. /Pol/’s discourse suggests that they see their memes are viable resources to achieve their objective, further suggesting that their sense of political participation and organization is being activated.

/Pol/’s rhetoric suggests that they are willing to organize and mobilize themselves to bring victory to their God. In a more literal sense, they present Trump as a figure they can rally behind; someone who is powerful and influential enough to create and sustain a movement. In contrast, they frame Clinton as a beatable figure and their discussion surrounding organization to combat her campaign suggests that they were willing to engage in practical forms of political participation, while also showing immense support of a distant, deity-like figure who they believed would Make American Great Again. Hillary, thus, is in their way of the America that they want. At this point in time, /pol/ is focused on defeating Clinton, since she is the enemy and their “meme magic” will be their weapon of choice; their swords in the fight.

MAGA

While this keyword occurs near the “Trump” keyword due to some of the same subject matter and terms that cluster around it, placement of “MAGA” relative to other words yields unique insight into /pol/’s view of what it truly means to Make America Great Again. In these early threads, “MAGA” and its cluster terms suggest that their sentiments against Mexican persons and their desire to build The Wall arises from a white, American superiority in comparison to other non-Americans. From these early moments, /pol/’s racist sentiments inform their worldview and aim to shape what MAGA can be going forward.

On this date, the cluster term “The Wall” appears. This term occurs near and around other words such as “Mexican” or “Mexico” in various posts. Such words suggest that there is a tension between white, American and Mexicans, as well as a suggested sense of superiority over Mexican individuals. /Pol/ aims to convey Trump as the most “patriotic candidate” since he is advocating for “America first” policies. He is the only candidate who is calling to “BUILD THE WALL” and will make “MEXICO WILL PAY FOR THE WALL.” Such posts suggests Mexico is inferior and can be told what to do by Trump. These conceptions of the “TRUMP ERA” suggest that /pol/ views Trump as a patriotic candidate since he has promised to “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN” with his rhetoric and policies for which he has advocated. This suggests that they believe that they can enter an era that they shape for themselves, with Trump at the helm. The collective effort of getting Trump elected is as important as erecting the monument to Trump’s election. By building a wall, this will keep Mexicans out and only keep “patriotic” Americans in.

Additionally, /pol/ users begin asking if Mexico has “started on the wall yet” and call for “Pedro” and “Paco” to “hurry up.” Their word choices suggest that they have the privilege and

ability to command Mexicans to build The Wall and that Mexicans do not have a choice in the matter. By choosing stereotypically Mexican names, users degrade Mexican individuals and trivialize them. /Pol/ users state that “Mexicans can’t be smart” and are expected to build the wall based on their race, illuminating the racism that some users openly exude towards Mexicans, no matter their immigration status. They see Mexico and people of Mexican descent as lesser than them, claiming that their country is a “shithole.” /Pol/’s rhetoric suggests that by electing Trump, The Wall will be built and keep Mexican people out, preventing America from being subjected to the “burrito goblins” any longer. Users ask what gives Mexicans the “right to just break into someone else’s country.” This suggests that /pol/ sees America as *their* country and, therefore, since Mexicans are at fault, they are lesser individuals of a “shithole” country and their personhood is unimportant. Moreover, these words indicate that the brown identity, and brown people for that matter, is not American according to /pol/’s worldview. The Wall will act as a means of containing those who belong and keeping out those who do not. Moreover, their word associations displays that they view Mexican individuals as lesser due to their ethnicity. This suggests that /pol/ users see themselves in a place of racial power and superiority and are, therefore, allowed to wield it over others as they see fit.

Additionally, there are countless images of characters wearing MAGA swag, including Pepe the Frog and their female anime “Awooment” mascot. Therefore, it is unsurprising, that a cluster that was frequently appears is “Awooment” or “Movement” that users exclaim in all caps in conjunction with the keyword. One user exclaims: “LET’S GO DONNY! MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! AAAXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX!!!!” The post is the online speech equivalent of a howl for joy, with its delivery in all caps and presentation of the same vowels in succession of one another. The cluster term of “awoooment” suggests that they

see this movement coming to fruition through the aid of what the MAGA phrase represents for supporters. /Pol/ users suggest that this movement is important and is “LITERALLY PART OF HISTORY.”

Additionally, one user views this movement as a vehicle for change, since even if Hillary wins, because things have “changed so much during this election” and that people are more willing to “stand up for what they believe in” even if it may be “politically incorrect.” Not only is the “movement is growing as we speak,” but that they can inspire change in America. They see the movement as more than just a flash-in-the-pan moment in politics but instead as a historical swing of the pendulum in favor of Republicans and their “politically incorrect” ideology. The sentiment on this board suggests that they believe their movement has, and will, continue to bring about change in their favor; in favor of their ideology, chiefly. /Pol/ users see Trump as a “beacon” of the “last hope we have as a nation,” suggesting America’s prosperity revolves around Trump’s MAGA slogan and its sentiments. This suggests that Trump as a presidential hopeful is much more than a meme to /pol/; he is providing them hope of a new America. If Trump is their “last hope,” then they see electing him as their moment to truly bring about the change they want to see in this country. They want MAGA to evolve into more than a slogan and for their movement’s sentiments to be actualized.

While MAGA and its clustered terms indicate that /pol/ is working hard for a particularly, racially pure vision of America, it also indicates that /pol/ sees a shift towards such sentiments in the greater public. /Pol/’s discourse also suggests that they believe that the movement that they are creating has the potential to truly Make American Great Again, whether Trumps wins or not, and their action is the key to unlocking MAGA. Moreover, /pol/’s discourse suggests that they began this movement because of and for Trump. They see his candidacy as a glimmer of hope

for the country and what they hope he can provide for it. While their conceptions of MAGA are in its early stages, their discourse illuminates the notion that they are ready for change and want their racist sentiments at the forefront. MAGA is slowly marrying its ideology and its nascent political identity.

November 8, 2016: Election Day

Election Day 2016 provides insight into /pol/'s worldview, traditional campaigning tactics, and political participation through the analysis of this day's keywords and cluster terms. The first keyword "Kek/Trump" provides two cluster terms or phrases: Take my Energy and Destiny (see Figure 4.4). The second keyword "MAGA" provides two cluster terms/phrases: Go Back and The Wall (see Figure 4.5). Finally, the third keyword "Vote" provides two cluster terms: Register and Love (see Figure 4.6).

Kek/Trump

For Trump to be victorious, /pol/ must submit to God, their emperor, to give him the sustenance he needs. /Pol/'s discourse forwards the idea that users view themselves as a necessary actor in Trump winning the presidency. Moreover, they want to give him their power so that they both can succeed. With /pol/ developing various prayers and calls for Trump/Kek to take their energy so that they can win, this suggests a religious connection and vigor that has developed between Trump and /pol/. This suggests that much like traditional religious followers, they are calling upon their deity to will their wishes into existence. Regardless of how the sentiment of bowing to the Kek deity may appear, the intensity and frequency in which this phrase occurs suggests the relationship between /pol/ and Trump is necessary; their followership and action is important. /Pol/'s worldview suggests that they realize that their action as political

actors is necessary and they need to supply Trump with all that they can offer to ensure he wins the presidency.

On this day, one common phrase that clusters with “Kek” and “Trump” is “Take my energy.” This phrase most often appears in all caps and appears to trigger other users on the board, who often repeat the phrase in some fashion in response to the previous user using “Kek” or “Trump,” as if it were an incantation. This phrase is used both with and around the keyword and cluster term in various posts. This phrase suggests that users want to provide Trump with sustenance to win the nomination based on the suggested meaning that these words carry. These words aim to convey that there is a literal and figurative sense of power that users believe connectively exists between them (/pol/) and Trump. By calling for Trump to “TAKE ALL MY ENERGY” because “KEK WILLS IT,” their words suggest that Trump *needs* /pol/ to succeed. These words in combination suggest that for /pol/ to achieve victory, Trump must take their power and use it. /Pol /users are the battery pack that will fuel Trump’s inevitable victory. If they all give their power to Trump, then they can succeed. By taking /pol/’s energy Trump “WILL WIN... \o/ \o/ \o/ \o/ \o/”. Through chants and prayer to “O LORD ALMIGHTY, GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB, BRING DOWN MOLOCH AND HUMBLE THESE EVILDOERS,” “Amern [sic],” /pol/ will provide Trump with victory through the energy they provide. The imagery that is produced from the words and use of symbols in this post suggest that users are bowing down to Trump and praising his name; they are summoning victory and praising Kek. This invokes the image of religious followers who submit to their Gods or figures within the religion to achieve solace or some form of salvation. In this case, Trump can give them their salvation. By stating that they are giving their “power” to Trump, this conception of their power source allows them to give him their all; their energy, their being. By dedicating

actual energy to campaigning and voting for Trump, this acts as a more tangible source of the power they exert. By giving Trump their power in words is a symbolic gesture but giving their power through action is a literal gesture of their allegiance to their God.

On this day, the cluster term “destiny” appears. This term occurs near and around other words such as “hopeful,” “victory,” and “God’s will.” These words are used both with and around the keyword and cluster term in various posts but are largely seen towards the end of the night when Trump appears to have won. By the end of the night, based on their discourse, users were all but convinced that Trump had clenched the presidency. Such words suggest that there is a sense of faith and optimism from Trump’s win but also a sense that they view Trump as their savior, both as the religious figure they have drafted him up to be and the person who they successfully elected to the presidency. This is conveyed through words such as “God’s will.” These words aim to convey that /pol/ is “hopeful” that Trump will not only Make America Great Again, but “the world will be great again”. Users suggest that “IT WAS BELIEF” that helped them prevail and that “THE WEST WILL RISE AGAIN”; they must “PRAISE KEK” for granting them victory. Many users are seen voicing their joy by stating that Trump was fulfilling his/their destiny for this country. Destiny is a term in particular that often conjures up feelings associated with religion or religious ideals, or at the very least has the ability to take on such a connotation due to our conceptions of the word. This offers deeper clarity as to how users saw Trump and what they believe they were fulfilling by voting for and mobilizing around him. The text suggests that a Trump win is necessary in order for the country to prosper.

Joke or deadly serious, meme or real president, users still saw themselves as instrumental in contributing to Donald Trump’s destiny. This suggests that they saw themselves as comrades in the fight against Clinton and have proven to be victorious; they were better than her. Thus,

Trump's win has the ability to influence more than just the country, but the world at large and /pol/ is hopeful about the future ahead. These posts also suggest the relationship and tensions between their trolling nature and their support of Trump, but regardless of how it is conveyed, their want to give their "energy" and submit to Trump is all the same. The tangible form of energy is channeled through their support through campaigning efforts, their time spent making memes, the votes that they have casted or are going to cast, etc., and the texts on this day suggest that users surmise if they give Trump everything that they are capable of giving, then they can be victorious. Overall, this cluster suggests that users have been eclipsed by pure joy when considering the notion that the God-figure of Trump had fulfilled his destiny to become President, and through /pol/ users' support and "power" he has the ability to put their wants into motion. In this case, MAGA is a way of life that could now be fully actualized.

MAGA

The sentiment that arose amongst users on this board suggests that to Make America Great Again, America must build a wall to keep "them" out. This keyword illuminates the connection between the anti-immigrant ideals Trump promoted and the blatantly racism that /pol/ already held and wants to advance. /Pol/'s worldview suggests the notion of a whiter America rising to prominence and keeping out minority groups that they dislike as inevitable per Trump victory, while also creating the space for racist ideals to turn into a stronger political ideology.

The discourse on this day provides many racist displays towards Hispanic Americans, stating that they needed to "go back," a term associated with MAGA. While some users stated that Hispanics supporting Trump were "safe," most board comments suggests that they believe that Hispanics need to "leave" this country. Users also appear to refer to Mexican individuals most when referencing their immigration status, with terms such as "deport(ed)" also appearing

on this date. /Pol/ users state the phrase “GO BACK” repeatedly, and in one case, a user said “GO BACK” in all caps forty-five times in succession within a single post. The use of repetition and all caps illuminates the emotional intensity and frequency in which this phrase is delivered. Additionally, the meaning that these words carry suggest that Mexican individuals do not belong in this country and are not wanted; to order someone to “go back” to where they came from suggests that the country was and will be better off without them in it. For some users that are not legal citizens, there is fear that after having “LIVED HERE MOST OF MY LIFE,” they will be “DEPORTED” against their will. However, /pol/ users state in response that “you fucked up juan [sic]”, but that “atleast [sic] you'll have a job... Building the wall.” The words used by /pol/ users suggest a lack of empathy, ridiculing in response to others’ fears. Therefore, their jokes are not half-hearted, they are cruel displays of racist sentiments held on the board.

Much like the previous date examined, The Wall is a structure that represents superiority and the MAGA sentiment. However, with a Trump win, The Wall is presumed to be inevitable. Terms and phrases such as “build,” kill,” and “Make Mexico Great Again” appear on this date near and around the keyword. Such words suggest that there is a hatred towards Mexican individuals based on the connotation that these words carry. Taken together, user posts suggest that to Make America Great Again, they must “BUILD A WALL AND DEPORT THEM ALL.” Through the power that they have bestowed upon Trump/Kek, they will be able to “KILL THEM ALL.” The connotation that that phrase carries suggests not only a lack of empathy but is also calling for the genocide of a people. This is an obvious display of white superiority. /Pol/ users view Mexican individuals as “TACONIGGER [sic]” (s) that need to “BUILD MY FUCKING WALL FOR ME;” they are a labor force for their wants, not a people. This rhetoric suggests that the only way that Mexican individuals can MAGA is to build a wall on behalf of white

Americans. Additionally, /pol/ users suggest that since Mexican individuals are unable to partake in MAGA, they need to go “MAKE MEXICO GREAT AGAIN”. /Pol/’s word choices and phrasing suggests that users do not see Hispanics as equals. The Wall in this case is a monument to Trump and the MAGA mentality has materialized into a tangible form of exclusion on a mass scale.

This ultimately plays into the notion that this /pol/ sees Trump as being consubstantial with their ideology and political identity in society. MAGA is dependent on Trump winning and carrying out racist ideals he supported on the campaign trail. Through his calls for building the wall and deporting immigrants, this gives credence to /pol/ users who agree with this sentiment and for them to build a movement around this larger-than-life figure, who they believe can provide a whiter America that serves them instead of minorities. Ultimately, MAGA is about reasserting the American identity and that /pol/ views themselves as calling the shots on who is “safe” and who is not. /Pol/’s sense of agency is growing, and they believe that their collective efforts can marshal these racist sentiments forward and Make America Great Again, or rather, their conception of what Making America Great Again can be.

Vote

This keyword occurred with high frequency throughout the posts. Moreover, the keyword told a quickly shifting story that develops throughout the day. Early, /pol/’s focus centers around the literal act of voting, with users encouraging other users to go vote. Towards the end of the day, the terms that appeared around this keyword are delivered with a different kind of emotional intensity as /pol/ users discussed the happenings of the election and their sentiments surrounding Trump’s win. This keyword and the cluster terms provide insight into /pol/’s suggested sense of both uncertainty and, ultimately, excitement surrounding the election. /Pol/’s encouragement of

political participation amongst users illuminates their willingness to utilize traditional tactics in order to produce change. This keyword also serves as a term to inspire action in their fellow users to achieve their objective.

The term “register” clusters around the keyword with high frequency. The discourse on this subject suggests that this cluster term appears in part due to some users being unclear on the process of being eligible to vote. When one user gets up at “fucking 6 AM to MAGA” and they cannot be bothered to vote, they question becomes “this is legal?”. As one user notes, it “seems to be a trend on /pol/” with “guys not knowing they had to register to vote,” a “stunning” idea to since everyone on the board “HAD ONE FUCKING JOB!”, that is, to vote of Donald Trump. Moreover, users in these threads repeatedly state that they had been instructing everyone “for months” to register to vote. /Pol/ users had been “worrying about it for a while” since “Trump's monster vote doesn't count for shit” if “fucking retards like OP that never registered,” but this notion is also unsurprising to some users since they state that /pol/ is filled with people who are “politically uneducated.”

While there is uncertainty about the outcome early in the day, users are encouraging others to “do it for AMERICA” and to “ask where your polling place is,” even if it means driving hours to do. This user is encouraging the other to take agency of the situation in this case; suggesting the importance of this single user’s vote, reflecting a dutiful conception of citizenship. Interestingly, Jarvis and Jennings (2017) forward the notion that right-leaning voters in particular typically emphasize the importance of voting as a form of electoral participation. Political participation can often require others encouraging action and providing support to one another. /Pol/ users, therefore, are no different than any other citizen in stating the importance of casting one’s vote; their advocacy is simply tailored to supporting a specific candidate. By

encouraging action, their discourse suggests that they believe they can collectively make a difference.

On this day, the cluster term “love” appears near and around the keyword. By the end of the night, Trump’s win seemingly inspires users to voice their feelings about the result of the election. Terms such as “cry/crying,” “joy,” and “happy” appear near the keyword and cluster term to suggest that the users’ view of political participation effectiveness is in direct correlation with the results of the election. Moreover, they believe that “one vote can make a difference” and that all of their votes ultimately “made a difference” in the end. Users are “crying of joy” and are “so happy” because they “did it,” they “pulled through,” victorious in their efforts and achieved their objective. Trump’s win is the “greatest thing that could have happened” and users have gained “much more respect for humanity.” Moreover, they collectively made this happen with this “HISTORIC” victory, and they “love” /pol/ for their efforts. The association of these terms indicate that /pol/ users do not just respect humanity, but respect what humans can do through political action. Additionally, this is a moment for them to rejoice in the fruits of their labor. It means that their campaigning can produce a desirable result. By acting in the political process, /pol/’s words suggest joy and a realization of what they are capable of as influential political actors. In this moment, users realize that their vote meant something. For some, it means Trump will stop minorities from trying to “ruin” their lives and their “kids [sic] lives.” Thus, by voting for Trump, their joyous victory will also provide a better America to them.

Users mobilized /pol/ board users towards action in this election, utilizing a quite conservative conception of dutiful citizenship. Yet interestingly, they view themselves as distinct from the mainstream. Their “love” of /pol/ and the realization that their votes made a difference is not a novel reaction produced from the outcome of an actor’s political participation in an

election; this illuminates how /pol/ is not unique in their efforts or realization of influence through political means per se. They sought out a candidate, mobilized around him, campaigned for him, and voted for him. In their case, their discourse suggests that they came to the realization that their efforts could produce desirable results by rallying behind Trump/Kek and letting the sentiments and hope of MAGA act as their guiding light towards their objective. This ultimately creates a sense of realized political agency; a realization that could actually make a tangible impact beyond the discourse occurring on their boards or the memes put out. Thus, /pol/'s worldview has evolved and is instead reflected in the notion that their movement can Make America Great Again; that they're powerful and influential political actors.

August 11, 2017: Day One of Charlottesville Rallies

Third and finally, the day of the Charlottesville rallies provides insight into /pol/'s worldview, realized political agency, and evolved agenda. The first keyword, "Unite the Right," provides two cluster terms: Trump's America and Awooment (see Figure 4.7). The second keyword, "White," provides two cluster terms: Nazi and Replace (see Figure 4.8).

Unite the Right

This keyword centers around racist statements, expressed on the first day of the Charlottesville rallies in 2017. /Pol/ now has repeatedly referred to itself as a movement and this keyword suggests a sentiment of ideological consubstantiality with protestors in the rallies. The threads I examined illuminate /pol/'s need to mobilize their base to "Unite the Right." This keyword indicates /pol/'s awe for the rally and the potential of such sentiments to shape the future of the United States. This keyword serves as a term to encourage the board's agenda and movement around something occurring in the mainstream. Whereas previous clusters indicate

primary concern for the here and now, this keyword and its associated terms speaks to the future of the movement.

On this day, the cluster term “Trump’s America” appears. This term occurs near and around other words such as “chills,” “Holocaust,” and “KKK.” Such words suggest that there is a sense of awe around the imagery that the rally is conveying, but also that there is a prominence and fondness of white dominance conveyed through words such as “Holocaust” and “KKK” and the connotation that these words carry. Users suggests that Unite the Right rally, much like the Holocaust and the KKK, “conjures up memories” of past, racist events, while also providing “CHILLS” to show the public a new era of white supremacy. Additionally, “Trump’s America” suggests the president wants to Make America Great Again via white supremacy and appreciation for it. These words and phrases are used to link to the notion that if this is “truly Trump’s America,” then Trump is the vehicle for this rhetoric to be more acceptable, even if he is not directly involved in the rallies.

Additionally, on this date, there is imagery of the /pol/ anime “awooment” mascot. Thus, “awooment” and “movement” are cluster terms that appear around this keyword. On previous dates, this mascot was used as a unifier for the Trump campaign but now stands for MAGA and its associated movement. Stating that the “fire is there” for MAGA and that if they “keep pushing,” then “MANY” more white individuals will be eager to serve the movement and see it prosper. Additionally, the suggestion that white individuals have “teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.” who can get involved once the movement is “stronger” suggests that there are untapped resources available. The idea that there are “MANY more just like me” suggests confidence in and underground support for white supremacy within our social and political system. There is also an indication of strategy around their next steps of political participation.

While some thought that the rallies were “cringey,” as in embarrassing, another cluster term to emerge, others thought it an effective way to give the country a taste of the movement. Some members question why anyone is “surprised” by their outward support of the rallies and white-centric sentiments since the board has been “dedicated to counter-Semitism⁴ this entire time.” /Pol/’s discourse suggests that they see the Unite the Right rallies as a necessary means of telling the sympathetic that “there are other people like them” and that white supremacists are “not just online,” but real beliefs held by real people. Others describe the rally as an “important first step” in furthering their ideology and allowing others to realize how prominent said ideals are.

The rhetorical function of the discourse occurring around the Unite the Right rally is to unite and excite /pol/’s base by reinforcing the ideals forwarded during the election and look forward. White racial superiority is the clear ideology underlying the keywords and clustered terms. Less obviously, the clusters reveal that at this date, /pol/ users presume that their work is to find the right strategies to grow the movement.

White

This keyword and its clustered terms produce similar sentiments associated with the “Unite the Right” keyword, but also illuminates this board’s worldview of how people view whiteness and those who uphold its values. This keyword illuminates the idea that the MAGA way of life was simply the beginning of this movement’s journey; it acts as a vehicle to begin unlocking their hopes for the country. This movement began with the support of Trump, but their

⁴ This term has been utilized to neutralize the negative connotation that the term of anti-Semitism has taken on, thus allowing users to try and re-define and claim this new term to describe their belief of and hatred of Jewish supremacy. However, it is termed, the meaning that arises from their word usage in this case gets at the same destination.

discourse on this day suggests their support of MAGA goes hand-in-hand with the pro-white message that they want to forward. Thus, the conceptions of what MAGA can be has evolved since summer 2016. However, this is not the final destination. Instead, this keyword and its cluster terms suggests that the white identity is paramount and /pol/ does not want the white identity to be “replaced.” Instead, they need to focus on the white, Nazi identity within their base to continue their momentum. Their rhetoric indicates that they realized their sense of political agency during the 2016 election and their racial power can bloom if they find common ground and garner ideas that their users and followers believe are worth fighting for.

The cluster term of “Nazi” often occurred near mentions of the keyword “White”. While Nazi imagery and discourse is prevalent, there is also resistance from some members regarding the association with Nazis and how this may alienate potential converts. The idea of “being a posterchild” of “literal nazis [sic]” is unappealing to some users since they are “an unapologetic white American [sic],” not a Nazi. Others disagree, claiming that they are “literal nazis [sic].” With terms such as “reclaiming” and “redpilled” appearing around this keyword and cluster term suggests that they need to awake their fellow white Americans to successfully advance the movement. /Pol/ is calling to “redpill [sic] the populace” since “white people likely support literal nazis[sic]” already; by exposing white individuals to the difficult truths of who they are or the underlying notions surrounding their race’s superiority, they can begin “reclaiming it’s [sic] meaning.” By reshaping the “Nazi” term away from its negative connotation, /pol/ users and sympathizes can be the crafters of the *new* Nazi, white identity, they claim. No matter what, they claim a need “to organise [sic] on all fronts” since regardless of public connotations, they will likely be seen as “nazis [sic] and rasicsts [sic] anyway.”

Thus, while users disagree on whether to openly associate themselves with the Nazi term, the disagreement is on messaging, not the meaning. In the end, the distinction between white and Nazi on /pol/ is moot. In their view, the sense of white prosperity is associated with identifying with the Nazi movement and the imagery that is associated with it. While alarming, the arguments suggesting identification within this movement shows a consistency in ideology, as well as consistency in the types of images utilized to get their message across. Pepe dressed as a Nazi and other Nazi-clad figures abound throughout the posts, reinforcing their attachment to sentiments of white supremacy and that identity. Thus, the way in which their ideology operates in this space illuminates the consistency in their beliefs.

Additionally, on this day the cluster term “replace” appears, also near “fear” and “irrelevant.” The “You will not replace us” chant at the rallies suggests a “fear in that chant,” as well as a “fear of being irrelevant,” or perhaps “already being irrelevant.” In “seeing the birthrates” of white Americans, and conversely of minorities, they see the “writing on the wall.” White Americans are “lonely” and “small” in a world “where an Indian woman will do your job for half and a robot for pennies.” They are “rejecting” this world and state that “WE WILL NOT BE REPLACED”; suggesting a link between the protestors and /pol/ users with the chant and underlying sentiments of the rally binding them together.

By chanting this phrase on /pol/, users reinforce these sentiments and give it more power, suggesting a /pol/ worldview synonymous with white nationalism. The assertion that the white identity is both superior and under attack points to a tension within these two ideas, while also illuminating the fear associated with being replaced and irrelevant. User comments show an online community at odds with the rest of the country regarding their white, American identity. They are fearful of being replaced and the MAGA way of life has allowed for a group who did

not want to be replaced, to feel represented; to have something to rally around that represents their sentiments and make them feel important, rather than “small.”

After almost a year into his presidency, their job of getting Trump into office is complete but their larger dream needs work. These final keywords and clusters make the unrealized goal palpable. The American identity is malleable and /pol/ sees their movement as able to make a change. However, they need to keep pushing for change and relevance so that they and their movement do not get “replaced;” suggesting that they do not want the movement to fade into obscurity. During and after the 2016 election, users indicated that if they elected Trump, he would unlock the MAGA way of life. Now, /pol/ indicates a more realistic, if more obviously sinister view: if the white-nationalist version of MAGA is to be achieved, they must do it. And this is just the beginning.

Evolving View of Political Identity

Across the three dates examined, a narrative ultimately emerges from this analysis. On the day that Donald Trump became the nominee, their discourse suggested that a relationship between Trump and /pol/ was emerging--one that was necessary for victory, as well as early conceptions of what MAGA could mean for white Americans. By election day, their movement had evolved and there was a clearer sense of their commitment to Trump and their willingness to follow Trump as a candidate, a God, and a beacon of hope. In this case, MAGA represented a means to an end, which would produce a better America for white individuals and a means of making presumed white superiority more commonplace. By the last date examined, the tone had shifted. There was less focus on Trump and more on /pol/'s white-centric movement driven by Nazi ideals to ensure their continued prosperity and superiority over minorities.

Thus, through these keywords and cluster term analysis, three observations and themes have emerged. First, the sense of comradeship and brotherhood that arose. Through /pol/'s efforts to elect Trump, a movement emerged and so did a sense of shared achievement upon their election win. Second, through mentions of pop culture and religion, or these tongue-in-cheek conceptions of these cultures, /pol/'s discourse suggests that there is a tension that exists between the /pol/ and Trump relationship across dates in various ways. This tension speaks to the relationship between /pol/'s reality and reality itself, since users advocate for Trump with such fervor and allegiance, yet Trump is a free agent running his campaign independent of /pol/ and their intervention. /Pol/ users are both spectators of their creations and wants yet are not entirely in control. Their followership of and amusement with Trump is less about the literal conceptions of a God, but rather, their willingness to follow Trump, at least through the campaign and election. Lastly, /pol/ users are, indeed, relevant political actors. Their political socialization and evolution as political actors shifts over time. After seeing themselves win an election, /pol/ users realize their effect on politics and what they truly care about as a movement.

Thus, while mention of 4chan and /pol/ may invoke notions of chaos and disruption, this group is much more than that. There is a commitment to a political agenda and ideology, even if that ideology is disruptive of current conceptions of pluralistic democracy. /Pol/'s movement therefore has evolved beyond the MAGA slogan, and instead represents their evolution towards white supremacy and a realized sense of political agency. In the next and final chapter, a consider these implications in more detail.

Chapter 5 - The Good, The Bad, and The Kek

This thesis has followed Kenneth Burke's lead, analyzing keywords and associational terms to discover /pol/'s collective attitude toward politics and overall worldview as expressed on three dates important in the political life of Donald Trump. My analysis demonstrates a rather unexpected point, considering that /pol/ represents a relatively new phenomenon in political campaigns. Namely, through sustained political involvement, /pol/ socialized into a group with a clear sense of political agency as well as sophistication, just as a political scientist or social-movement scholar might predict. However, /pol/ users are unique in that their agency developed in an online space that wished to forward a white nationalist agenda, a troubling and potentially dangerous outcome of political engagement.

While this form of engagement may be disruptive, "grassroots organizing is occurring in online conversational spaces" even still (Eddington, 2018, p. 10). And while political scientists have repeatedly documented polarization as a byproduct of increasing political engagement, /pol/'s extremist and regressive ideology puts an entirely new spin on the dilemma. The rise of negative "affective partisanship" and toxic ideology serves to further polarize politics (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 146). This chapter forwards three compelling implications of these findings. Additionally, this chapter develops recommendations for relevant organizations and individuals, as well as future directions for scholars to explore.

Review of Findings

This thesis initially questioned what drove /pol/'s sense of agency surrounding their discourse and actions, and what this says about the future of political participation and social movements. After analyzing posts on /pol/ across the critical dates, the answer is clear: /Pol/'s sense of agency and use of traditional, political campaigning tactics for candidate Donald Trump

allowed them to further racist sentiments in accordance with their conceptions of the MAGA slogan. This agency was driven by their brand of traditionalist, yet exaggerated, alt-right conservatism that conveyed a worldview of agonistic obligation to provide a better America, or rather, a better white America. Ultimately, this led to the formation of a movement built on furthering a white-centric agenda. /Pol/'s sense of political agency evolved and became realized upon their awareness of their ability to produce action in mobilizing their base and electing Trump. This contributed to a sense of political power that created a more sophisticated set of political actors.

Thus, while parts of society may take issue with their agenda, their evolution as political actors is a compelling narrative that speaks to the benefits of what political participation can produce in its citizens. Digital politics is a way to build up individuals into truly meaningful political actors. To that end, /pol/ showcases how individuals can utilize online spaces to allow a wide array of citizens to participate via platforms and discussion boards, offer more political agency to the general public versus the already powerful, and offer the ability to organize and produce real world results. Yet, this emancipatory element of /pol/ users' political expression is showcased in rather problematic ways.

/Pol/ specifically does not create more democracy or more equality through their acts that take place in spaces that offer equality and broad forms of political expression. Users want more democracy, or rather democratic power, but want it for themselves. They are the wielders of potential change, yet do not want to share its benefits with those deemed unworthy. Thus, returning to our dilemma, as /pol showcases both the positives and negatives associated with online political organizing and what it can produce. To outsiders, there is perhaps the conception that they are simply trying to promote chaos, but they showcase a commitment to a policy

agenda. While /pol/'s agenda presents problems, it is still an agenda that emerged as a reflection of this unique set of political actors.

Three Observations and Take-Aways

This thesis's analysis ultimately provides clarity regarding /pol/'s sense of political agency and political participation tactics. Specifically, on /pol/ across the dates examined, my cluster analysis provided insight into 1.) the brotherhood and sense of comradery that arose during this movement, 2). the relationship between /pol/ and Trump, and lastly, 3.) how /pol/ users developed into a more sophisticated set of political actors. These observations ultimately provide better conceptions of what rhetorically took place within these keywords and clusters in order to better inform our understanding of /pol/ overall.

Brotherhood

Through the cluster analysis, several observations became pronounced, one of which is the sense of comradery and brotherhood expressed on the board. A movement ultimately emerged through /pol/'s efforts to campaign for and elect Donald Trump to the presidency. Upon their election win, their rhetoric suggested a sense of shared achievement with Trump, but also amongst one another. /Pol/'s sense of excitement and shared accomplishment that developed as a result of this movement is not an uncommon occurrence. In fact, this is a rather traditional result exerted amongst members of a social movement.

Previous scholarship suggests that when individuals work toward a common goal, a sense of comradery develops. The expressed love and brotherhood that emerged is notable in this online space of geek masculinity but is a rather typical sentiment of expression within social movements. In this instance, the debate over online-versus-offline effectiveness falls flat. Instead, this forwards that a sense of admiration and affinity for peers can exist in contexts

beyond the physical. This appreciation for one another forwards the importance of citizenship and friendship to achieve goals and be good, or what the agents conceptualize as *good*, citizens in order to uphold their society.

Thus, regardless of users' conceptions of good or bad, these spaces tend to lend themselves to rather insular forms of relational interactions due to the large amount of men that purvey over the union of geekdom and masculinity online. Taylor (2012) states that geek masculinity is often tied to a high level of expertise in technology, as well as science and gaming, with trivial knowledge valued and lauded. This displayed form of expertise also acts as a justification and sense of who is in the 'in' group and who is in the 'out' group; benefitting from the system of privilege and sexism that tend to exclude women by default (Taylor, 2012; Kendall, 2002). Moreover, while technological access and prowess often characterizes geek masculinity, these men also adopt elements of hegemonic masculinity, "such as judgement and mastery," and denounce others, "such as sporting or athletic cultures," as they see fit to serve their own ends (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 2; Taylor, 2012). Yet interestingly, in online contexts, geek masculinity is often showcased through cries of victimhood and alt-right sentiments that reflect users' fragility (Blodgett & Salter, 2018). Therefore, their space acts as a safe place for exerting their brand of paradoxical masculinity.

Thus, the geek identity is a way of consolidating certain behaviors, rituals, etc. of men, such as emphasizing "fraternal relationships," through other unique skills, hobbies, and sentiments more closely associated with that of adolescence and geekdom to create a "powerful alternative modality" for these men to operate under (Taylor, 2012, p. 111). Users in these spaces are using technologies made by them, for them, to allow this modality to flourish. The cloak of anonymity in these spaces also provide useful affordances in furthering their own norms and

behaviors without having to change or answer to anyone whom they wish to exclude. /Pol/ and other spaces of similar form use this structure to organize their ideas in a toxic yet juvenile manner as a result. Therefore, online spaces often lend themselves easily to the formation of insulated, fraternal relationships since it caters to the men who ultimately created it and continue to uphold its unspoken yet understood values.

Past research documents spaces like /pol/ as breeding grounds for toxic, geek masculinity. Eddington (2020) states that this ideology can persist and exist in these spaces partially due to the notion that “members co-construct resilience in their interactions with one another” that serve to “affirm identity anchors” through advice, strategies, etc. via member to member communication (p. 115). This suggests that within this online milieu, users are able to develop ties that project a sense of brotherhood in their shared political success. Users cannot see each other, nevertheless, they rally around a common goal and express appreciation one another’s political efforts. A successful community takes the skill-set and collective work of many, and my analysis suggests that /pol/ believes they are an example of this notion. Specifically, that their collective actions via meme creation, campaigning, etc. influenced the election and helped elect Donald Trump. Users’ repeated announcements of love for one another and /pol/ furthers the idea that a sense of solidarity aids like-minded actors in mobilizing towards a common goal (Loader, 2008). Without such comradery, sustained action, while not impossible to continue, would prove to be more difficult.

To be a community, all users do not need to like each other, nor do they need to know each other. What they do need to have is shared interests; that will trump all regarding movement success. The perceived fellowship with one another is important; /pol/ ultimately became a society of like-minded actors. While their rhetoric may be at times derogatory towards one

another, this does not erase the affinity that develops amongst a set of motivated individuals. /Pol/ developed a sense of community within this board that served to reinforce their ideals and cultivate the organization of their movement (Eddington, 2020). They co-constructed an identity towards an objective through a shared political ideology, which ultimately served as the building blocks for their brotherhood to be built on.

Shifting Relationship with Trump

/Pol/'s cheeky pop-culture and religious references suggests a certain brand of tension in its relationship with Donald Trump. /Pol/ users are simultaneously able to watch the fruits of their labor materialize, while also not being in control of the campaign at large. Regardless, their sense of political agency crystalized. My analysis indicates that /pol/'s view of Trump is not literally Jesus-like. Rather, the discourse symbolically indicates a very real willingness to follow Trump's path towards political victory and 'save' America. However, the Trump-/pol/ relationship shifts over time, as Trump's Emperor God status eventually becomes of lesser importance to their movement's agenda.

Per /pol/ user's pop-culture references, their discourse suggests a personalized relationship between the two parties. In recent decades, there has been a greater relationship between a political candidate's perceived personality and impact on voting behaviors in citizens; personalization of politics has become a fundamental element in the election process (Garzia, 2011, p. 698). Interestingly, Garzia (2011) states that the effect of media on this personalization "lowers politicians to the level of the audience," stripping the leader of an "aura of greatness" or unapproachability; politicians become more relatable (p. 701). This ultimately illustrates the tension within the Trump-/pol/ relationship since there is a "paradox" that exists between what made Trump both presidential and unpresidential to users; this contradiction interestingly served

to strengthen the relationship (p. 701). My analysis suggests that /pol/ users felt consubstantial with Trump through this personalization of politics, while also holding him up on a pedestal of greatness during the campaign cycle. Thus, the Trump-/pol/ relationship benefited from this lowering effect that Garzia (2011) forwards but exists in contrast to the notion that the “aura” is also lowered at the beginning of this relationship.

Trump and /pol/ users seem consubstantial with one another regarding their ideology. The language they both use regarding the American identity is similar, even if /pol/ users are slightly more creative in the way that they express it through their disruptive and bombastic statements. Thus, by heralding Trump as a larger-than-life religious figure, /pol/ reinforces their tongue-in-cheek conceptions of politics and the means in which they convey it. Ultimately, religion, too, is a pop culture reference, given the development of the Kek figure and its melding with the Pepe meme, for example. Thus, their admiration of Trump as a pop-cultural and religious icon are one in the same. /Pol/ doesn't actually believe that Trump is their God, but they are still following him as a political, celebrity-like figure. This group should not be taken literally on this count. Instead, outsiders need to read between the lines as there is important meaning behind the imagery and references employed. The religion they conceptualized is for lulz, but this does not detract from their willingness to devote themselves politically to Trump; users are still followers and believers in Trump. These archived posts indicate that allegiance to the figure and humorous sarcasm can co-exist.

At first, the Trump and /pol/ relationship was rather co-dependent. To Make America Great Again, /pol/'s rhetoric suggests that they believe they must act on the political battlefield. Without /pol/'s action, Clinton may be victorious, which would mean that no one would be able to Make America Great Again. My analysis indicates that in this way, /pol/ forwards a very

traditional idea of the dutiful citizen, engaged in politics and following the leader not for personal gain but because it is the right thing to do (Schudson, 1998).

However, my analysis also indicates that /pol/ over time developed a clear sense of who they were and what they wanted politically. Trump winning the presidency created space for /pol/ users to develop their own conceptions of what they wanted MAGA to be. Thus, the /pol/ and Trump relationship ultimately devolves from devotion to barely citing Trump at all in their later-stage political organizing. As their ideology and agenda that developed, MAGA evolved and became an identity that transcended Trump, a way for /pol/ to encourage the white identity. This movement needed ideas and sentiments to rally around beyond the titular figure that initially bound them together and inspired action. Thus, their relationship with Trump is no longer paramount, nor is MAGA per se.

In the end, /pol/ is nostalgic for an era in which white supremacy was tacitly accepted and widespread. If Trump was the end-all-be-all of their political activities, the election of Donald Trump would have been enough, in theory, for /pol/ to feel victorious in achieving their objective. Rather, MAGA and the sentiments around it offered /pol/ even greater potential. /Pol/'s discourse aims to conjure feelings of identification with the white supremacist movement to further explain the its legitimacy and keep its relevancy alive. By August 2017, /pol/ users indicate a much greater ambition than Trump. Their relationship had shifted from serving and supporting Trump to how to advance their movement agenda irrespective of political leaders.

Thus, Donald Trump, or, more accurately, campaigning for Trump, was a vehicle moving them towards realizing their sense of political agency and the power that they can wield within society. The racist, sexist, xenophobic ideals of this community have been, and will continue, to exist within this community with or without Donald Trump. However, campaigning for and

winning the presidency for their preferred candidate is what gave /pol/ the agency and experience to mobilize their ideals in a more productive and ample way. Their sentiments grew louder, and they grew more powerful. This group has always been bold, but the belief that they could elect a President and influence an election was attractive to them, as was forwarding the MAGA sentiments in the first place. Therefore, their rhetoric on the final day examined illuminates the idea that their movement gained and will sustain traction through their ideas of white nationalism, rather than Trump.

In fact, their lack of citing Trump compared to other dates examined suggests that they have become a more sophisticated set of political actors that can act on their own. While Trump jumpstarted their journey of becoming more influential political actors, he is no longer central to their efforts or agenda. If anything, the legacy of MAGA lives on within the board's white nationalist agenda. They no longer need to cite Trump in everything they do; they believe that he came to power through their help and has given them the space to create what they wish to create.

More Sophisticated Political Actors

/Pol/ user's sense of political agency evolved over time, and so too did their movement. Thus, /pol/ users became relevant political actors through coordinated and organized action. Their political socialization shifted over time due to the evolution of their political values and opinions. They originally organized their ideals around the guise of MAGA-related sentiments and support of Donald Trump, but their commitment to their agenda and ideology produced a set of politically engaged agents. /Pol/'s movement evolved beyond the original conceptions of what the MAGA slogan could be, and instead reimagined what their political domain could look like

along their evolution towards marshaling a white nationalist agenda and developing a greater sense of political agency.

Therefore, my analysis points the potency of online spaces in nurturing relevant political actors. Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng (2014) assert that the interaction fostered on social media allows citizens to express themselves politically, as well as engage in and mobilize political action and participation in both online and offline contexts. However, this study ultimately illuminates a tension in the field's research regarding political action and participation in online spaces. Currently, far too many scholars fail to acknowledge the dark side of political involvement in online contexts. Thus, while our field's research in this specific area of study is still in its infancy, there needs to be greater attention from political communication scholars especially regarding the dangers of this type of communication in these spaces.

Online platforms like 4chan are capable of mobilizing individuals with shared interests and a shared agenda. Thus, conceptions of what social action can look like online is evolving along with its actors. Political organizing is no longer an offline task or activity. Koch (2008) asserts that political action must be taken in offline contexts for real change to occur. However, this study asserts that /pol/'s online and offline mobilization proves otherwise since these spaces are effective places for citizens to engage in political dialogue and participation. In contrast to Koch's argument, communication is not truly one-way communication if a dialogue is taking place. In /pol/'s case their dialogue and strategizing lead to users becoming political actors by aiming to create change. However, their success can be attributed to more than their communication behaviors. Their use of meme warfare against Hillary Clinton that produced change as well. While this space was an unlikely place for change to occur, they produced influential results all the same.

While some claim that they came to /pol/ rather innocently, they ultimately stayed for the memes (Hatewatch Staff, 2018). These memes were filled with racist rhetoric that ultimately aided informing a white nationalist agenda. While humor is the “drug” of choice for /pol/ users, this ultimately allowed for these sentiments to transcend meme form and to take their alt-right message to a wider audience (Hatewatch Staff, 2018). This agenda-building ultimately impacted the efficacy of the movement; their agenda evolved and their communication became more sophisticated over time. By August 2017, their conversations relied very little on juvenile, hyperbolic references to God and Emperor and were more intellectual, regardless of the ugly sentiments they conveyed.

Thus, conceiving of /pol/ simply as a group of trolls seeking chaos is shortsighted. This study’s analysis reveals the evolution of a serious if monstrously regressive political agenda for social change. /Pol/ no longer needs Trump or MAGA to be successful political actors since their agenda’s alt-right, white supremacy sentiments are now salient in the country’s public discourse. They used their skills to assess and tackle the issues they cared about to mobilize their base and win converts. In order to re-characterize the political domain, their movement needed more than just memes; they needed powerful ideas (Loader, 2008). Thus, the political socialization and engagement in politics acted as a means of producing more sophisticated political actors.

Thus, /pol/’s evolution went from personalized politics and nascent forms of advocacy for policies, to the creation of a clear organizational identity. Cheney (1983) asserts that organizations and identification often go hand-in-hand. Organizations often communicate their goals, ideas, etc. rather clearly, but also depend on members identifying with these goals and ideas to then do “what’s best” for the organization through both individual and collective action (Cheney, 1983). Moreover, “an individual is socialized to some extent through participation in

any organization,” with the efforts of the individual and organization often shown to “overlap or coincide” (p. 147). Thus, allowing members, regardless of their similarities or differences, to operate under similar motives and identities that serve to unite and offer meaning to their membership; the “we” of identification (Cheney, 1983, p. 148). Thus, /pol/’s conceptions of “what’s best” for the campaign evolved into “what’s best” for /pol/ and their agenda due to their organizational evolution of identity. The shift from admiration of Trump to the development of an agenda and identity showcases /pol/’s agency that developed through their loyalty to their organization and its ideas, tactics, etc. Moreover, this building of their identity is reflected within their organization’s collective sense of achievements as well; they collectively achieved their objective due to their organizations’ efforts. Therefore, /pol/’s evolution of identification illuminates the subtle ways in which even the most unlikely of political actors can rise up beyond initial associations and instead promote an agenda reflective of their specific identity sans Trump.

/Pol/ users realized that their political campaigning tactics, shaping of a movement, and moves toward an agenda that advanced their racist ideals is ultimately what they cared about. Thus, their movement can continue with the newfound sense of agency and realization of their power to move the country in an alt-right direction. Their narrative has shifted and changed and the agenda that emerged from /pol/’s movement and reflects this set of unique, political actors.

Implications for Future Action

While /pol/’s sense of agency and political agenda developed over time, it would be naïve to consider this an isolated incident in politics. How might /pol/, or other platforms holding similar sentiments, impact future political campaigns, non-partisan organizations, instructors,

and citizens at large? What do these groups and individuals need to consider going forward? In what follows I consider such questions.

Reassessing Campaign Consequences

The relationship between political campaigns and their supporters is influential. Supporters are the life blood of a campaign; their supporters and organizers marshal their ideals forward and collectively shape the outcomes of elections. Petre (2018) asserts that organizers become well incorporated into the campaign's greater message through a sense of political identification. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign is an example of this notion, with much of its grassroots organizers lacking political experience yet connecting and promoting his campaign's message (Petre, 2018). However, what happens when this relationship is in service of a toxic ideology? This study asserts that future political campaigns need to gain a better understanding of such notions regarding memes and their persuasiveness in the political consciousness of the population, as well as a better understanding of political actors who are mobilizing and campaigning in online spaces. It would be wrong to claim that political campaigns can stop memes, hateful or loving. This study's analysis points to the fact that while /pol/ believed they were politically linked to Trump, neither him nor his campaign could stop these supporters from forwarding their agenda through their memetic creations. However, with campaigning demanding a strong online presence, there needs to be a greater consideration of the kinds of information that a campaign is circulating or supporting openly online. Political campaigns cannot outright stop memes or political actors and their rhetoric from circulating or being created, but they can curb or denounce such action and material.

The Trump campaign and Donald Trump circulated memes that promoted a white nationalist agenda during the 2016 election cycle. Pepe the Frog, pro-Trump, and anti-Clinton

images were rampant during the campaign, and Trump and members of his campaign on several occasions shared these images on Twitter and Instagram (Beran, 2017). Pepe the Frog raises issues regarding its white nationalist associations but still Trump's official Twitter account retweeted videos and images of pro-Trump rhetoric and images associated with and without Pepe that 4chan took credit for producing (Steinblatt, 2015). Thus, Trump contributed to its greater influence by retweeting it; these actions suffer ethical implications regardless of an online citizen's background knowledge of 4chan or their content.

Thus, campaign staff need to be more conscious of the content they are supporting in these online spaces by circulating and re-circulating images and information. While this played a role in /pol/'s sense that Trump was signaling them to create more content when Donald Trump would retweet or like a meme of theirs, it is not the sole reason they continued their political campaigning for him. Their agenda became paramount, meaning that their agenda had the ability to bleed into the greater consciousness of political society through their memetic influences. With online groups mobilizing towards political ends, political campaigns need to understand what their presence can produce and the effects it can have on the greater political sphere of society through the rhetoric perpetuated.

A greater consciousness, or rather, stronger sense of online ethics, is necessary. Political campaign staff need to develop a better awareness of what they are consuming, liking, recirculating. If a meme does not come from them directly or is not their direct or original creation, it needs to be under a healthy level of suspicion and subject to heavy review regarding its legitimacy and potential effects on the political campaign cycle at large. There are real consequences and ramifications to the greater political sphere that online spaces have the ability to influence through memes and other user-created messages. Thus, campaigns need to question:

how will this impact not only our supporters, but the greater political conversation? What are the discursive elements at play? Are they as simple as they appear? Is that just a frog? A campaign's consideration of these questions should be based on a political and ethical obligation to the public. Regardless of whether it comes from external or internal sources, memes are persuasive and can influence the public. The sources of said memes have an agenda, and regardless of what *kind* of agenda it is, there can be influential and harmful effects to our political society as a result.

Thus, campaigns have an obligation to the public, as well as to competing campaigns, to consider what is happening discursively within information or images that support their campaign's objectives. Moreover, campaigns in that same vein have an obligation to consider, beyond memetic images or the message conveyed, how campaigning tactics are operating in online spaces. In this digital era, individuals are able to converse with one another with ease. There are benefits and drawbacks to this notion. Thus, the way that individuals mobilize online at the very least needs to be paid some critical attention. In a democracy, we cannot stop the circulation of ideas or campaigning tactics, nor should we. Even if these spaces support toxic ideals, this is one of the costs of living in a democratic society that values free speech; not all communication will be productive or what we want political participation to be in its idealized conception. This is the messiness of what our political system can produce but is also the value of it. Individuals have the ability, more than ever, to mobilize towards an objective and make an impact in online spaces. Whether or not it for good or bad is decided by the actors who choose to wield this power.

/Pol/ and other online spaces that are perceived as toxic believe in what they are doing, and perhaps do not believe they are doing anything wrong in their political activities. They are

trying to make changes based on their agenda that they believe needs to be exposed. Thus, terming them as deplorables does little good. The reality is that they are citizens and exerted their political rights. They are not criminals, but they their rhetoric is bigoted. They are exclusionary, they are hurtful, they are insular. That is toxic.

Not only is their rhetoric toxic, but this rhetoric is particularly harmful to a society fueled by identity politics, and their rhetoric suggests that they perceive this on some level. Thus, we must push back on Koch's (2005) notion that online spaces are incapable of producing true political action and actors as /pol/'s mobilization and development of a political agenda shows us otherwise. Occurrences like /pol/'s will not occur in isolation. This is simply the beginning for both /pol/ and online spaces like these to operate as legitimate political actors and forces in the political sphere. Therefore, action and considerations regarding how political campaigns interact with individuals and information online is paramount.

Rethinking Fringe vs. Influential

In our modern, free-speech society, dominated by conflicting and impassioned rhetoric, it can sometimes be difficult to discern what is true from false. However, there are organizations that aim to expose the falsities of our political sphere to help the public discern. These anti-hate organization provide the public with conceptions of groups they perhaps have only heard about in passing. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in particular has by far one of the best conceptions of what 4chan, specifically /pol/, is capable of in the political sphere; this organization is one of the few reporting on 4chan's /pol/ beyond journalistic sources.

This organization sees /pol/ as a board that stands for alt-right policies and have been unmistakably influential in this movement. The SPLC does not demean or lessen /pol/'s or the other alt-right platform's impact on our political world, either. They recognize them for who and

what they are: they are influential and dangerous political actors who have a wide following and marshal harmful rhetoric. However, the SPLC coins /pol/ as a “fringe” alt-right online group compared to more widely known groups such as r/The_Donald. This is where the SPLC specifically is underestimating /pol/, and if not, they are not giving them as much credit as they deserve. Additionally, this also draws attention to the notion that there is a void of analysis and reporting on /pol/ from other anti-hate organizations. What /pol/ deserves is more coverage and more exposure of their rhetoric from these organizations concerned with toxic rhetoric.

While /pol/ is often mentioned in coverage on the alt-right movement, /pol/’s influence is generally glossed over. In the SPLC’s analysis of “The Right Stuff,” a white nationalist board, /pol/ is tied with Jared Taylor, an editor for *The American Renaissance*, at the top of the list with roughly twenty-three percent of users citing chan culture as their reason for getting involved in the movement (Hatewatch Staff, 2018). This is striking considering r/The_Donald is seventieth on the list yet is much more prominent in reporting on the alt-right movement. Again, /pol/ is cited as influential, yet there is a lack of attention on how /pol/ produces much of the racist content that it goes mainstream.

This study illuminates the notion that /pol/ users were producers of political memetic content during the campaign that served to promote Trump, degrade Clinton, and forward an alt-right agenda. Moreover, 4chan created the cult/religion of Kek and /pol/ adopted it and developed the pro-Trump mythos surrounding his presidential candidacy. With the Kek meme appearing in “political circles where alt-right activists and avid Donald Trump supporters lurk,” thus supporting this thesis’s claims (Neiwert, 2017, par. 1). Moreover, /pol/’s rhetoric suggests that their memes have the ability to be influential because they do not appear too manicured or too “manufactured” for the public to consume yet contain alt-right undertones that convey

messages to supporters of the movement. Thus, /pol/ *does* deserve to be the centerpiece of examination, rather than a group that is cited sparsely or lumped in with others.

While this thesis does not claim that /pol/ users are in fact the drivers of the alt-right movement in other communities and platforms, the analysis that the SPLC conducted suggests that their influence is one of the greatest in this movement across platforms. Thus, /pol/ needs to be focused on more heavily by anti-hate and bigotry organizations reporting and analyzing the rhetoric of the alt-right movement. If they are not to be underestimated, then they need to be further examined and heralded as the influencer that the data and analysis suggests. The role of 4chan cannot be overlooked in the white-nationalist movement; most content of that nature is arising from the platform (Feldman, 2015). Thus, all anti-hate and bigotry organizations need to dedicate more research to /pol/ in order to develop more awareness around the board, rather than labeling them as a fringe group, which carries its own rhetorical connotation.

To state that something is fringe implies less impact. This rhetorically suggests that a fringe group is far outside the neatly drawn lines that describe what the alt-right and white supremacy is supposed to look like. In fact, /pol/ is highly influential and arguably has conceptualized these terms on a much larger scale than anyone, organization or otherwise, gives them credit for. These organizations need investigate /pol/ and their rhetoric, as opposed to featuring random posts or quotations on occasion. By focusing on other groups and platforms, both small and large, rather than /pol/, they are distracting their audience from the problem that /pol/'s rhetoric truly poses. The public needs a clearer understanding of the notion that /pol/ is a powerful group that not only marshals these notions forward and originates.

By dismissing /pol/ as little more than a trolling culture, they lessen their impact as dangerous political actors. /Pol/ undoubtedly engages in trolling tactics, but they are also a rather

sophisticated set of political actors that created a movement in which individuals cite them as one of their introductions into the white nationalist movement (Southern Poverty Law Center, extremist profile, par. 17) Additionally, the SPLC, in particular, often lumps in 4chan with /pol/, or seemingly use them interchangeably when /pol/ is the center of this movement, not 4chan at large. These discrepancies make it difficult for a casual reader to distinguish between these two; a shortcoming of the current state of reporting on /pol/. Moving forward, the all anti-hate and bigotry organizations need to make /pol/'s, not 4chan's, influence on this movement clearer and devote more research to their board.

Educating and Acting in Civic Spaces

Public Speaking/Communication and college classroom settings in general act as one of the introductions into agenda building, finding one's voice, and conceptions of civility. We encourage students to explore what excites them and to speak about it, but what there are some problems with starting with what excites them, rather than what is appropriate for the audience and occasion? What if the rhetoric in which they wish to forward is bigoted? What if they realize it? What if they do not? Regardless, what students choose to say in the classroom sets a tone for student learning and inclusion, and instructors need to consider consequences of allowing a wide-open marketplace of ideas to exist.

Everything is political in some way. Thus, everything that is said in the classroom needs to be examined and considered as potentially influential political discourse. Ethics is a constantly moving target, but conceptions of what this looks like in the classroom and beyond does not have to be so abstract. This does not mean that public speaking instructors or other instructors need to act as censors or comrades of the liberal media, but instead, that they need to emphasize the importance of what it means to hold a platform and to uphold the values of what it

means to be an ethical speaker. Students and instructors alike arguably hold a platform every time they give a speech, a lecture, or simply open their mouths to interact. Thus, it is important to consider the climate and conception of a healthy and productive classroom environment more than ever. Moreover, in today's political climate, it is especially paramount to hold space for different and new ideas to exist in our classroom. Students should feel supported in their efforts to push-back on concepts and create new knowledge as budding scholars, but instructors have the responsibility make the distinction between what could be potentially harmful rhetoric and what is scholarly curiosity or exploration.

Moreover, instructors have the responsibility to not only allow for sound dialogues in our classrooms but to consider how this will impact our students as people, or rather, as citizens in our political world. There should be an emphasis on civility in our classrooms. There should be an emphasis on creating ethical speakers. There should be emphasis on helping students recognize the platform in which they hold beyond the classroom presentation. What they say in outside contexts, especially in the digital age, can make a lasting impact. Online communication is a new means in which citizens can interact with one another, and we should not discount the role that platforms can play in our political system. Nor should we discount the roles that any number of citizens can play in mobilizing certain sentiments in the digital realm.

This does not mean that we as instructors are responsible for what students say outside the classroom or online; we don't have a means of truly knowing what that communication looks like. It is our roles to encourage growth and respect via classroom interactions. Good citizenship can start in the classroom. It is not the cure-all, but instructors need to be cognizant of the role that they play in shaping our citizens as members of our society.

Additionally, moving forward, it is important for all citizens, whether it is in the classroom or otherwise, to consider what we say to one another and how we consume and marshal forward information. This information can be verbal or written, online or offline. While a rather simple notion, we as citizens need to consider the way in which we forward and consume information and how it could potentially impact our greater world. Moreover, better information literacy in our citizens is necessary. Citizens need to know what they are consuming and are falling prey to online. While /pol/ users arguably knew what effects their actions would have, not all citizens may understand that their retweet or a divisive figure or quoting of slanted partisan information may be playing into /pol/'s trap. The more individuals perpetuate misinformation, the more rampant it is and the more rampant, the more it imbeds itself into the political consciousness of society. Citizens need to question how information online is operating, rather than just accepting and retweeting it as truth. This will not eliminate misinformation, but greater conceptions of what slanted rhetoric looks like and how this contributes to the problem is helpful. Identity politics are alive and well, and it is important that we as citizens do not get caught up in the 'sides' that we are on, and instead consider what impact we could have on our society based on the words we choose to say; even if they seem harmless.

Moreover, we need to consider the effects of what we say in online contexts. In the case of /pol/ and other similar platforms, something can start out as a joke and evolve into much more. We need to be aware of our digital, political footprint. It is important to ensure that *we* do not become the individuals we condemn. A call for civility is important in our current political climate, but the way we exist and interact online is paramount. Thus, consideration of what we say online is important, and the 2016 election and /pol/ illuminate this notion. As our society and digital platforms rise, there will be more information for us to consume. Ultimately, citizens will

have to either rise up against misinformation and marshal forward less divisive rhetoric in the name of civility or to succumb to the online dog whistles towards our political identities.

Ultimately, this thesis is advocating for more civility, considerations of ethics and user-generated content in the online sphere, as well as coverage of /pol/'s rhetoric. These tactics, while not a cure-all, for the organizations, groups, and citizens in question are important considerations going forward in this digital era. This study's calls for action are necessary; not acting at all suggests that the harmful rhetoric of /pol/'s movement will continue to rise and continue as the white nationalist movement overall gains more traction. In order to move away from the increasingly concerning status quo, we must act and support action for the sake of our society's political future.

Future Directions for Scholars

The examination of texts on /pol/ via the Burkean cluster analysis provided insightful results, revealing user self-understandings that a quantitative analysis would likely miss. However, there are limits to what the rhetorical method and cluster analysis can do. These considerations and constraints lead me to recommend a few directions for future scholars to employ.

Based on my reading, this thesis should encourage future scholars to examine the alt-right movement on /pol/ further. For example, the "OK to be White" slogan coined in 2018 that developed on /pol/ could provide further insight into this group's sentiments and their progression as a movement. While the Southern Poverty Law Center refers to /pol/ as the "home of trolling," this symbol is just as easily delivered with a smirk as it is by actual white nationalists, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis (Neiwert, 2018, par. 2). Thus, it could be a valuable

artifact to aid in furthering the discipline's knowledge about white nationalist agenda building and rhetoric mobilized in online spaces.

Additionally, the dates that this thesis examined could be further utilized for a rhetorical analysis of the 2016 election on /pol/ under a critical race theory lens. /Pol/'s rhetoric created the space for racist ideals to turn into everyday political talk, thus, credence to those who hold racist beliefs to feel more comfortable articulating their distrust or distaste of other, additional minority groups. This suggests a need for further analysis of their rhetoric in order to better understand this movement and their sentiments regarding power and race. The progression of MAGA sentiments were both associated with Trump and independent of Trump, yet were closely related to race and white nationalism. Due to the method employed, this thesis was not able to explore these sentiments beyond word associations and meaning due to the confines of this method of analysis.

This thesis demonstrates the power of online participation to transform trolls into political actors and organizers. Thus, future scholars can utilize this work and employ different methods to further the field's conceptions of the influence that these online spaces are capable of having on our political sphere. Ultimately, this study found various phrases and memes that were prominent and influential on this board across the dates examined. Future scholars should conduct a mixed methods or qualitative study utilizing a semantic network analysis in which popular phrases and/or memes related to /pol/'s political endeavors. Words and images featured on other popular platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and other alt-right boards in 2016 would be coded and examined to determine how far /pol/'s political influence and rhetoric stretched and the kinds of sentiments associated. To my point, Eddington (2018) and Lambert (2017) assert that a semantic network analysis would be useful to this kind of artifact and its

objective since this method and text mining allows a researcher to examine conversational topics as well as useful discursive topics and associations between various words or concepts that lie within the text. Thus, we need to build on the notion that words matter.

The aforementioned studies suggest that by analyzing words, this allows us to quantify and be specific about the connections that form between the use of words. However, an interpretive analysis can better inform what these words mean, as exemplified in this study. Quantitative studies are limited in their ability to further examine specific content, the sentiments lying within these post, or political influence in a more interpretive sense due to the large amount of data collected. Ultimately, this study shows that these two concepts can complement each other, but requires greater exploration, whether that be in other online communities already examined or to consider how these groups ultimately influence each other. A mixed method approach would offer new understanding of /pol/'s political power in contrast to their sense of power that developed rhetorically in the discourse examined in this thesis.

Conclusion

/Pol/'s political actors became more sophisticated over time as their agenda was built and their movement evolved and flourished. Their sense of agency and use of traditional political participation tactics ultimately lead to their sentiment that they influenced the 2016 election, leading to a greater sense of political awareness and power. The research suggests that this ultimately created a more sophisticated sense of political actors who bound together to influence political outcomes for their own interests. In this case, /pol/ is a wonderful example of what digital spaces can offer in terms of political movement mobilization. However, to that end, they are also an incredibly concerning example. Digital platforms can allow for hateful and bigoted rhetoric to exist just as easily as productive and civil rhetoric in these spaces. Therefore, the

actors are the necessary life and blood of any movement, whether it be online or offline, but those actors' objectives need to be more closely examined

Does this mean that all Trump supporters are neo-Nazis? No. Does this mean that all /pol/ members are neo-Nazis? No. What this movement does illuminate, is the notion that an ideological identity is capable of forming and flourishing in an online space and unlikely actors are capable of producing change. /Pol/ users realized their sense of political agency and power by employing traditional political participation tactics. As their agenda evolved, their rhetoric became more overt with what their movement stood for: racism in support of white prosperity and power.

This thesis asserts that the political ripples of what /pol/ did in the 2016 election will not be an isolated incident, in fact, /pol/'s movement and others like it or in favor of it will only grow and fester if action is not taken and awareness does not rise. Therefore, it is paramount that both future researchers and citizens concern themselves with the implications of toxic mobilization and political action that arises from all types, from all characters in online spaces and the impact this has on our political system. Their trolling tactics distract society from their real power, since we underestimate their power because we far too often write them off as nothing more than trolls or a fringe group. /Pol/ users are much more than that, and if we let them, they will continue to prosper and heuristically operate in the political sphere for outcomes that have the potential to far supersede what we have conceptualized. Our digital spaces have evolved, and it is time our conceptions of political action and its actors in online contexts evolves too.

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