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Post-Truth Protest: How 4chan Cooked Up the Pizzagate Bullshit

Marc Tuters, Emilija Jokubauskaitė, Daniel Bach

Introduction

On 4 December 2016, a man entered a Washington, D.C., pizza parlor armed with an AR-15 assault rifle in an attempt to save the victims of an alleged satanic pedophilia ring run by prominent members of the Democratic Party. While the story had already been discredited (LaCapria), at the time of the incident, nearly half of Trump voters were found to give a measure of credence to the same rumors that had apparently inspired the gunman (Frankovic). Was we will discuss here, the bizarre conspiracy theory known as "Pizzagate" had in fact originated a month earlier on 4chan/pol/, a message forum whose very *raison d'être* is to protest against "political correctness" of the liberal establishment, and which had recently become a hub for "loose coordination" amongst members the insurgent US 'alt-right' movement (Hawley 48). Over a period of 25 hours beginning on 3 November 2016, contributors to the /pol/ forum combed through a cache of private e-mails belonging to Hillary Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta, obtained by Russian hackers (Franceschi-Bicchieri) and leaked by Julian Assange (Wikileaks). In this short time period contributors to the forum thus constructed the basic elements of a narrative that would be amplified by a newly formed "right-wing media network", in which the "repetition, variation, and circulation" of "repeated falsehoods" may be understood as an "important driver towards a 'post-truth' world" (Benkler et al). Heavily promoted by a new class of right-wing pundits on Twitter (Wendling), the case of Pizzagate prompts us to reconsider the presumed progressive valence of social media protest (Zuckerman).

While there is literature, both popular and academic, on earlier protest movements associated with 4chan (Stryker; Olson; Coleman; Phillips), there is still a relative paucity of empirical research into the newer forms of alt-right collective action that have emerged from 4chan. And while there have been journalistic exposés tracing the dissemination of the Pizzagate rumors across social media as well as deconstructing its bizarre narrative (Fisher et al.; Aisch; Robb), as of yet there has been no rigorous analysis of the provenance of this particular story. This article thus provides an empirical study of how the Pizzagate conspiracy theory developed out of a particular set of collective action techniques that were in turn shaped by the material affordances of 4chan's most active message board, the notorious and highly offensive /pol/.

Grammatised Collective Action

Our empirical approach is partially inspired by the limited data-scientific literature of 4chan (Bernstein et al.; Hine et al.; Zannetou et al.), and combines close and distant reading techniques to study how the technical design of 4chan "grammatises" new forms of collective action. Our coinage of **grammatised collective action** is based on the notion of "grammars of action" from the field of critical information studies, which posits the radical idea that innovations in computational systems can also be understood as "ontological advances" (Agre 749), insofar as computation tends to break the flux of human activity into discrete elements. By introducing this concept our intent is not to minimise individual agency, but rather to emphasise the ways in which computational systems can be conceptualised in terms of an individual-milieu dyad where the "individual carries with it a certain inheritance [...] animated by all the potentials that characterise [...] the structure of a physical system" (Simondon 306). Our argument is that grammatisation may be thought to create new kinds of niches, or affordances, for new forms of sociality and, crucially, new forms of collective action — in the case of 4chan/pol/, how anonymity and ephemerality may be thought to afford a kind of **post-truth protest**.

Affordance was initially proposed as a means by which to overcome the dualistic tendency, inherited from phenomenology, to bracket the subject from its environment. Thus, affordance is a relational concept "equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour" (Gibson 129). While, in the strictly materialist sense affordances are "always there" (Gibson 132), their capacity to shape action depends upon their discovery and exploitation by particular forms of life that are capable of perceiving them. It is axiomatic within ethology that forms of life can be understood to thrive in their own dynamic, yet in some real sense ontologically distinct, lifeworlds (von Uexküll). Departing from this axiom, affordances can thus be defined, somewhat confusingly but accurately, as an "invariant combination of variables" (Gibson 134). In the case of new media, the same technological object may afford different actions for specific users — for instance, the uses of an online platform appears differently from the perspective of the individual users, businesses, or a developer (Gillespie). Recent literature within the field of new media has sought to engage with this concept of affordance as the methodological basis for attending to "the specificity of platforms" (Bucher and Helmond 242), for example by focussing on how a platform's affordances may be used as a "mechanism of governance" (Crawford and Gillespie 411), how they may "foster democratic deliberation" (Halpern and Gibbs 1159), and be implicated in the "production of normativity" (Stanfill 1061).

As an anonymous and essentially ephemeral peer-produced image-board, 4chan has a quite simple technical design when compared with the dominant social media platforms discussed in the new media literature on affordances. Paradoxically however in the simplicity of their design 4chan boards may be understood to afford rather complex forms of self-expression and of coordinated action amongst their dedicated users, whom refer to themselves as "anons". It has been noted, for example, that the production of provocative Internet memes on 4chan's /b/ board — the birthplace of [Rickrolling](#) — could be understood as a type of "contested cultural capital", whose "media literate" usage allows anons to demonstrate their in-group status in the absence of any persistent reputational capital (Nissenbaum and Shiffman). In order to appreciate how 4chan grammatises action it is thus useful to study its characteristic affordances, the most notable of which is its renowned **anonymity**. We should thus begin by noting how the design of the site allows anyone to post anything virtually anonymously so long as comments remain on topic for the given board. Indeed, it was this particular affordance that informed the emergence of the collective identity of the hacktivist group "Anonymous", some ten years before 4chan became publicly associated with the rise of the alt-right.

In addition to anonymity the other affordance that makes 4chan particularly unique is **ephemerality**. As stated, the design of 4chan is quite straightforward. Anons post comments to ongoing threaded discussions, which start with an **original post**. Threads with the most recent comments appear first in order at the top of a given board, which result in the previous threads getting pushed down the page. Even in the case of the most popular threads 4chan boards only allow a finite number of comments before threads must be **purged**. As a result of this design, no matter how popular a discussion might be, once having reached the **bump-limit** threads expire, moving down the front page onto the second and third page either to be temporarily

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catalogued or else to disappear from the site altogether (see Image 1 for how popular threads on /pol/, represented in red, are purged after reaching the bump-limit).

 55 minutes all 4chan/pol/ threads and their positions, sampled every 2 minutes (Hagen)

Image 1: 55 minutes of all 4chan/pol/ threads and their positions, sampled every 2 minutes (Hagen)

Adding to this ephemerality, general discussion on 4chan is also governed by moderators — this in spite of 4chan’s anarchic reputation — who are uniquely empowered with the ability to effectively kill a thread, or a series of threads. **Autosaging**, one of the possible techniques available to moderators, is usually only exerted in instances when the discussion is deemed as being off-topic or inappropriate. As a result of the combined affordances, discussions can be extremely rapid and intense — in the case of the creation of Pizzagate, this process took 25 hours (see Tokmetzis for an account based on our research).

The combination of 4chan’s unique affordances of anonymity and ephemerality brings us to a third factor that is crucial in order to understand how it is that 4chan anons cooked-up the Pizzagate story: the **general thread**. This process involves anons combing through previous discussion threads in order to create a new thread that compiles all the salient details on a given topic often archiving this data with services like Pastebin — an online content hosting service usually used to share snippets of code — or Google Docs since the latter tend to be less ephemeral than 4chan.

In addition to keeping a conversation alive after a thread has been purged, in the case of Pizzagate we noticed that general threads were crucial to the process of framing those discussions going forward. While multiple general threads might emerge on a given topic, only one will consolidate the ongoing conversation thereby affording significant authority to a single author (as opposed to the anonymous mass) in terms of deciding on which parts of a prior thread to include or exclude. While general threads occur relatively commonly in 4chan, in the case of Pizzagate, this process seemed to take on the form of a real-time collective research effort that we will refer to as **bullshit accumulation**.

The analytic philosopher Harry Frankfurt argues that bullshit is form of knowledge-production that appears unconcerned with objective truth, and as such can be distinguished from misinformation. Frankfurt sees bullshit as “more ambitious” than misinformation defining it as “panoramic rather than particular” since it is also prepared to “fake the context”, which in his estimation makes bullshit a “greater enemy of the truth” than lies (62, 52). Through an investigation into the origins of Pizzagate on /pol/, we thus are able to understand how grammatised collective action assists in the accumulation of bullshit in the service of a kind of post-truth political protest.

Bullshit Accumulation

4chan has a pragmatic and paradoxical relationship with belief that has been characterised in terms of kind of quasi-religious ironic collectivism (Burton). Because of this “weaponizing [of] irony” (Wilson) it is difficult to objectively determine to what extent anons actually believed that Pizzagate was real, and in a sense it is beside the point. In combination then with the site’s aforementioned affordances, it is this peculiar relationship with the truth which thus makes /pol/ so uniquely productive of bullshit.

 Original pizzagate post on 4chan/pol/ **Image 2: Original pizzagate post on 4chan/pol/**

When #Pizzagate started trending on Twitter on 4 November 2017, it became clear that much of the narrative, and in particular the ‘pizza connection’, was based on arcane (if not simply ridiculous) interpretations of a cache of e-mails belonging to Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta [released by Wikileaks](#) during the final weeks of the campaign. While many of the subsequent journalistic exposé would claim that Pizzagate began on 4chan, they did not explore its origins, perhaps because of the fact that 4chan does not consistently archive its threads. Our analysis overcame this obstacle by using a third party archive, [Archive4plebs](#), which allowed us to pinpoint the first instance of a thread (/pol/) that discussed a connection between the keyword “pizza” and the leaked e-mails (Image 2).


 4chan/pol/Pizzagate general threads

Image 3: 4chan/pol/ Pizzagate general threads

Starting with the timestamp of the first thread, we identified a total of 18 additional general threads related to the topic of Pizzagate (see Image 3). This establishes a 25-hour timeframe in which the Pizzagate narrative was formed (from Wednesday 2 November 2016, 22:17:20, until Thursday 3 November 2016, 23:24:01). We developed a timeline (Image 4) identifying 13 key moments in the development of the Pizzagate story such as the first attempts at disseminating the narrative to other platforms such as the Reddit forum r/The_Donald a popular forum whose reactionary politics had arguably set the broader tone for the Trump campaign (Heikkila).

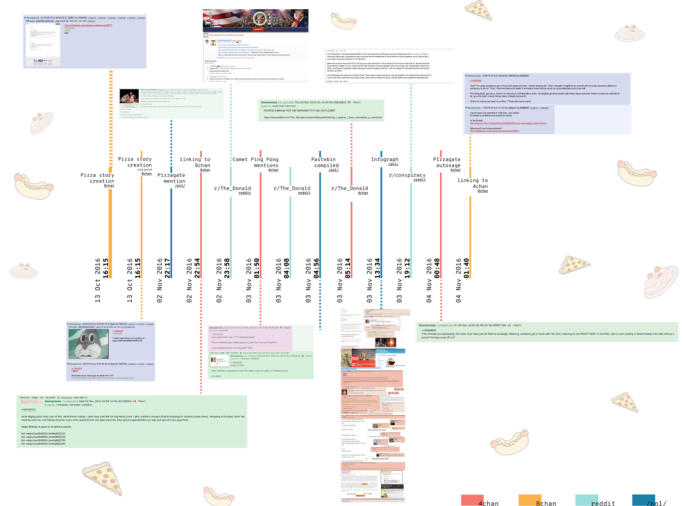


Image 4: timeline of the birth of Pizzagate. Design by Elena Aversa, information design student at Density Design Lab.

The association between the Clinton campaign and pedophilia came from another narrative on 4chan known as 'Orgy Island', which alleged the Clintons flew to a secret island for sex tourism aboard a private jet called "Lolita Express" owned by Jeffrey Epstein, an American financier who had served 13 months in prison for soliciting an underage prostitute. As with the Pizzagate story, this narrative also appears to have developed through the shared infrastructure of Pastebin links included in general posts (Pastebin) often alongside Wikileaks links.

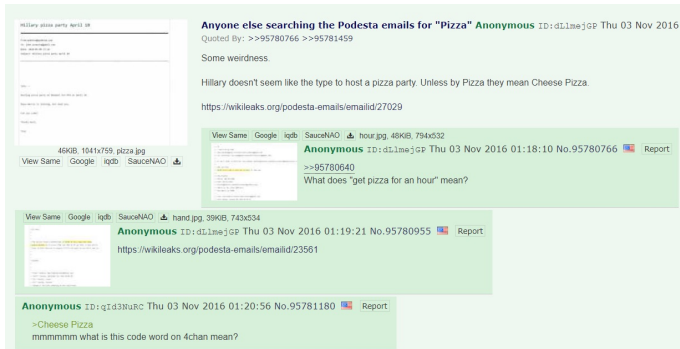


Image 5: Clues about "pizza" being investigated

Orgy Island and other stories were thus combined together with 'clues', many of which were found in the leaked Podesta e-mails, in order to imagine the connections between pedophilia and pizza. It was noticed that several of Podesta's e-mails, for example, mentioned the phrase 'cheese pizza' (see Image 5), which on 4chan had long been used as a code word for 'child pornography', the latter which is banned from the site.

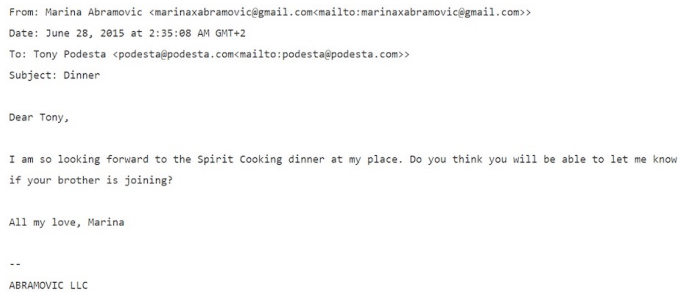


Image 6: leaked Podesta e-mail from Marina Abramovic

In another leaked e-mail, for example, sent to Podesta from the renowned performance artist Marina Abramovich (see Image 6), a reference to one of her art projects, entitled 'Spirit Cooking' — an oblique reference to the mid-century English occultist Aleister Crowley — was interpreted as evidence of Clinton's involvement in satanic rituals (see Image 7). In the course of this one-day period then, many if not most of the coordinates for the Pizzagate narrative were thus put into place subsequently to be amplified by a new breed of populist social media activists in protest against a corrupt Democratic establishment.



Image 7: /pol/ anon's reaction to the e-mail in Image 6

During its initial inception on /pol/, there was the apparent need for visualisations in order make sense of all the data. Quite early on in the process, for example, one anon posted:

my brain is exploding trying to organize the connections. Anyone have diagrams of these connections?

In response, anons produced numerous conspiratorial visualisations, such as a map featuring all the child-related businesses in the neighbourhood of the D.C. pizza parlor — owned by the boyfriend of the prominent Democratic strategist David Brock — which seemed to have logos of the same general shape as the symbols apparently used by pedophiles, and whose locations seems furthermore to line up in the shape of a satanic pentagram (see Image 8). Such visualisations appear to have served three purposes: they helped anons to identify connections, they helped them circumvent 4chan's purging process — indeed they were often hosted on third-party sites such as Imgur — and finally they helped anons to ultimately communicate the Pizzagate narrative to a broader audience.

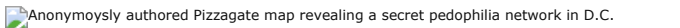


Image 8. Anonymously authored Pizzagate map revealing a secret pedophilia network in D.C.

By using an inductive approach to categorise the comments in the general threads a set of non-exclusive codes emerged, which can be grouped into five overarching categories: **researching, interpreting, soliciting, archiving** and **publishing**. As visualised in Image 9, the techniques used

by anons in the genesis of Pizzagate appears as a kind of vernacular rendition of many of the same "digital methods" that we use as Internet researchers. An analysis of these techniques thus helps us to understanding how a grammatised form of collective action arises out of anons' negotiations with the affordances of 4chan — most notably the constant purging of threads — and how, in special circumstances, this can lead to bullshit accumulation.

 vernacular digital methods on /pol/

Image 9: vernacular digital methods on /pol/

Conclusion

What this analysis ultimately reveals is how 4chan/pol/s ephemerality affordance contributed to an environment that is remarkably productive of bullshit. As a type of knowledge-accumulation, bullshit confirms preconceived biases through appealing to emotion — this at the expense of the broader shared epistemic principles, an objective notion of "truth" that arguably forms the foundation for public reason in large and complex liberal societies (Lynch). In this sense, the bullshit of Pizzagate resonates with Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarian discourse which nurtures a conspiratorial redefining of emotional truth as "whatever respectable society had hypocritically passed over, or covered with corruption" (49).

As right-wing populism establishes itself evermore firmly in many countries in which technocratic liberalism had formerly held sway, the demand for emotionally satisfying post-truth, will surely keep the new online bullshit factories like /pol/ in business. Yet, while the same figures who initially assiduously sought to promote Pizzagate have subsequently tried to distance themselves from the story (Doubeck; Colbourn), Pizzagate continues to live on in certain 'alternative facts' communities (Voat).

If we conceptualise the notion of a 'public' as a local and transient entity that is, above all, defined by its active engagement with a given 'issue' (Marres), then perhaps we should consider Pizzagate as representing a new post-truth species of issue-public. Indeed, one could go so far as to argue that, in the era of post-truth, the very 'reality' of contemporary issues-publics are increasingly becoming a function of their what communities want to believe. Such a neopragmatist theory might even be used to support the post-truth claim — as produced by the grammatised collective actions of 4chan anons in the course of a single day — that **Pizzagate is real!**

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