From cyberfascism to terrorism: On 4chan/pol/ culture and the transnational production of memetic violence

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Funding information
Research Council of Norway, Grant/Award Number: 287230

Abstract
This article examines the fascists imaginaries that are produced and circulated at 4chan /pol/. Based on analysis of memes and posts collected during a 6-month period in 2019, it explores the diagnoses given by anonymous users to the imagining of the ultra-nation and dehumanized others, and the prescriptions for the remedies needed to bring about its saving. It argues that the cultural practices of /pol/ where fascist fantasies of white supremacy are spread fast and anonymously in a transnational milieu through transgressive play frames are particularly powerful for the amplification of the logic of an endangered ultra-nation that needs urgent violent defence to obtain racial palingenesis. As such cyberfascism co-produced in a leaderless network among users scattered across continents lends itself to calls for violent action against minority communities, including terrorism.

KEYWORDS
chan culture, cyberfascism, far-right, terrorism, ultranationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

On 9 March 2019, the 28-year-old white supremacist Brenton Tarrant massacred 51 people during Friday prayers at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, the deadliest mass shooting in the history of...
New Zealand. Since the mass casualty attack, four young, male white supremacists have been directly inspired by Tarrant to carry out deadly attacks in the United States (Poway, California on 27 April and in El-Paso, California on 3 August), Norway (in Bærum, a suburb of Oslo on 18 August) and in Germany (Halle on 9 October).

All of the terrorists preannounced their attacks on social media, including anonymous imageboards like 8chan, 4chan, Endchan and Kohlchan. In the past few years, the combination of anonymity with a lack of moderation has made such chan platforms gathering places for an uneasy community of far-right nationalists and white supremacists who rapidly and anonymously produce and spread fascist content online. The anonymous users (self-defining and hereafter referred to as anons) are scattered geographically, yet interconnected in a transnational leaderless network where their fascist ideology is nurtured.

A decision to commit a terrorist attack alone does not mean acting outside of social movement frameworks, ideologies and networks. It makes sense to talk about a continuum of ‘collective extreme-right’ violence whereby lone actors imitate a form of political violence based on examples carried out in a different context (Macklin, 2019; Nacos, 2009). If what we are encountering is a pattern of leaderless fascist inspirational terrorism, then we must address at set of overriding questions. What are the ideas and practices that have inspired the act of fascist violence in New Zealand, North-America, Germany and Norway? What characterizes fascists visual culture and calls for political violence at the platforms the perpetrators socialized at? To answer these questions, in this article, I examine the fascist imaginaries that are produced and circulated at the imageboard website 4chan /pol/. First, the article discusses theories for understanding cyberfascism in the digital, hyperconnected age. Secondly, the article provides a brief overview of the central workings and characteristics of the 4chan /pol/ platform as this is central to understand the transnational production of cyberfascism. I then analyse posts, memes and visuals collected during a 6-month period between the terror attack in Christchurch and the attack in Bærum, Norway. Through discourse analysis of memes and text, I explore the diagnoses given by users to the current imagining of the ultra-nation, race and dehumanized others, and the prescriptions for the remedies needed to bring about its saving. I argue the cyberfascism produced at /pol/ lends itself to calls for violent action against minority communities, including terrorism. The dynamics of the /pol/ platform, where fascist fantasies of white supremacy are spread fast and anonymously in a transnational network through transgressive play frames, is particularly powerful for the amplification of the logic of an endangered ultra-nation that needs urgent violent defence to obtain racial palingenesis.

2 | CYBERFASCISM IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL HYPERCONNECTIVITY

In the analysis of the transnational reconfiguration of fascism online, I draw upon the theoretical insights of scholars that have analysed how fascism has evolved since 1945. A century after the word came into being to refer to a new Italian movement and programme, its definition is still varied and contested. Roger Griffin (1991) conceptualizes fascism as a form of revolutionary ultranationalism. In his definition, fascism is an ideology with a mythical core characterized by populist ultranationalism (a nationalism that takes on a quasi-religious character) and that it is palingenetic (which means that it includes ideas and dreams of national rebirth and revival). Fascists seek to return to a mythicized historical and racial past, to strengthen the nation by resurrecting it. Robert Paxton (2004: p. 218) defines fascism as ‘a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity in which committed nationalist militants abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleaning and external expansion’. Fascism operates through notions of an authentic ultra-nation, community and mythical tradition that is continuously re-narrated (Bhabha, 1990), re-imagined (Anderson, 2006) and re-invented in relation to perceived threatening others. Certain collective, inherent qualities are ascribed to various ‘enemy groups’ framed as an existential threat to a nation or civilization imagined as homogenous (Brubaker, 2017; Gilroy, 2000; Esposito & Kalin, 2011). Underpinning the externalization of minorities and migrants framed as an existential threat is an emphasis on ideas about bio-social purity, culture, religion and roots in a land or region (Holmes, 2000). In an era of
globalization, the fascist ultra-nation is not necessarily equated with a particular nation-state. Palingenetic ultra-nationalism, despite its stress on the need for national or racial palingenesis, can acquire a transnational dimension that call for a reborn civilizational order.

Douglas Holmes (2019) notes how we cannot understand fascism in the digital age as a single movement within a particular nation-state. Rather we must approach fascism as a disperse phenomenon that reverberates across national contexts and continents. Digital media and emerging technologies have detached fascism even more from a restricted ‘nation-statist’ fascism, revealing its many countless faces and transnational reconfigurations (Griffin, 2018, p. 43). Castelles noted already in 1996 how digital technologies reconceptualize new forms of spatial arrangements, resulting in a new type of space that allows distant synchronous, real-time interaction. New online contexts enable rapid cross-national diffusion processes to a large and varied audience that is often responsive to appeals for actions (Castelles, 1996, p. 146). In the age of social media that enables hyperconnectivity (Brubaker, 2020), new forms of screen-mediated cyberfascisms have emerged, that orchestrates—with the aid of bots and trolls—the ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing of shadow publics networked in cyberspace (Holmes, 2019). I use Roger Griffin’s (2000) definition of cyberfascism as the virtualization of fascist thought and action. In contrast to classical fascism characterized by a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants working in effective collaboration with traditional elites (Paxton, 2004, p. 218), cyberfascism is highly fluid and lacks a clear organizational centre and ideological cohesion (Fieltiz & Marcks, 2019).

Following the theoretical insights above, this article examines the transnational production of fascism in a particular transnational digital subculture, that of the imageboard website 4chan’s /pol/ (politically incorrect) board. I draw upon discourse analysis of posts produced by anonymous users (self-identifying as anon) during a 6-month period between March and September 2019 that falls between the terrorist attack in Christchurch and an attack in Bærum, Norway. Methodologically, I have observed posting behaviour and the production of visual culture spending hundreds of hours at /pol/. In addition to online ‘lurking’ in real time, I have searched for specific terms related to the Christchurch terrorist in /pol/ threads at 4plebs.org, a sister site of 4chan that archives the board’s typically ephemeral content. Through qualitative discourse analysis of posts, including memes and text (Stolcke, 1995; Wodak et al., 1999), I identify what fascist tropes and conspiracy theories are produced at /pol/ and subsequently seek to theorize the transnational production of cyberfascism that characterizes this digital space. Since discourse analysis primarily focuses on language and imaginaries in use, I focus first on the site itself and existing research about its users, before moving on to an analysis of the collected visuals. I argue that in the case of 4chan /pol/, cyberfascism cannot be understood as propagated by a single actor in a particular nation-state, but by multiple co-producers connected across continents in digital networks. At a loosely moderated platform, users post anonymously in a transnational milieu adopting subcultural styles of play and transgression. These empirical insights have consequences for how we theorize fascist collective identification and how fascism works in the age of screen-mediated belonging. Rather than an organization with clear hierarchies and leadership structures located in a particular region, users are situated in a transnational, leaderless network where they nurture belonging and propagate fantasies of heroic masculinity and redemptive violence fast and anonymously. I suggest that although cyberfascism at /pol/ is produced through transgressive play frames, it lends itself to violent action against the dehumanized minorities and marked enemies of the ultra-nation, including terrorism.

3 | TRANSNATIONAL PRODUCTION OF CYBERFASCISM

The English-language imageboard website 4chan was launched by Christopher Pool in October 2003. The site was inspired by 2channel (2ch.net), an Internet forum that was especially popular in Japan. Like 2ch, 4chan allowed users to post anonymously, quickly gaining users and popularity. The combination of anonymity with a lack of moderation has since its inception made the imageboard a hotspot for offensive humour, coalescing into political activism on multiple occasions. The decentralized, international hacktivist collective known as Anonymous emerged at 4chan,
and targeted trolling campaigns, doxxing and ‘raids’ are known counter-cultural strategies from anons (Coleman, 2015). Today, 4chan features 69 boards dedicated to a wide variety of topics, from Japanese pop culture, anime and manga to video games, music, literature, fitness, politics and sports among others (Phillips, 2015). Some of 4chan’s most important aspects are anonymity (there is no identity associated with posts) and ephemerality (inactive threads are routinely deleted). 4chan has 25 million monthly visitors, with approximately 800,000 posts made daily.

The site is built around a bulletin-board model. An original poster creates a new thread by making a post with one single image attached to a board with a particular focus of interest. Other users can reply, with or without images. Anons claim that 4chan is non-hierarchical, yet there is a struggle to obtain symbolic status and recognition by fellow users by producing content others will engage with. 4chan’s ‘rating system’ rewards controversial and transgressive posts and much-replied posts stand out when you skip through the thread.

One of the most popular containment boards is the /pol/ board. The official stated purpose of pol (politically incorrect) is the ‘discussion of news, world events, political issues, and other related topics’. Since 2015, 4chan has increasingly been associated with the far-right and white supremacy, with /pol/ as the main incubator. Racist and other white supremacist terms have risen significantly with a 40% increase in racist content and 25% increasing in violent language, including Nazi propaganda (Arthur, 2019; Thompson, 2018). 4chan/pol/ has become a de-facto haven for white supremacists who rapidly produce and spread fascist content, fantasies of racial purity and glorify violence.

According to an analysis made in 2016, the United States dominated in total threads created at /pol/ with the top five countries in terms of threads per capita being New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Finland and Australia. The flag of the country the user posted from is included along with each post, based on IP geolocation. Geo-location and nationality can be manipulated by anons using VPNs and proxies, thus it not trustworthy. The statistics reported nevertheless give an overview under which nationality the anons self-identify. According to the 4chan statistics, around half of the users self-identify as being based in the United States, followed by the English-speaking countries of United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. While /pol/ is primarily an English-speaking board, there are still users from many non-English speaking countries—for example, France, Germany, Brazil, Russia and several Scandinavian and Eastern European countries are represented. This suggests that the users, while geographically scattered, are interconnected in a transnational milieu. While fascist activists in this digital space can be concerned with the preservation of imagined national purity and the protection of national interests, their collected identification at this transnational platform goes beyond local geographies. Since /pol/ is a transnational platform, users draw upon meaning from multiple national, socio-historic and cultural contexts to reconfigure fascist and conspiracy-based racist messages and imaginaries. The international character of /pol/ might also explain why the regeneration of the ultra-nation promoted is not so much focused on protecting the racial purity of particular nation-state, but largely conceived in transnational terms to ensure the revival of an imagined Western white supremacy.

4 | CYBERFASCISM IN PLAY FRAMES

Understanding central workings and dynamics of 4chan /pol/ is essential for understanding the transnational production of cyberfascism. Several scholars have conducted fieldwork at chan forums, trying to understand what motivates users to participate. First, for individuals from a tech-savvy generation that grew up with social media, it is easy and cheap to go online. For some users, online communities like 4chan can provide an escape from isolation or grievances users might experience in the physical world (Dematagoda, 2017, p. 13). The platform provides a place to experience a sense of belonging and community, to negotiate identity and masculinity and forge friendships. Secondly, the chan platform is a place for transgressive entertainment and explorative behaviour. Whitney Phillips has noted how the communal joy of lulz, the acute amusement in the face of someone else’s distress, is a sensation driving users to chan forums (Phillips, 2015, p. 27). The users Phillips studied at 4chan /b/ board, believed that nothing should be taken seriously, and hence they regard public displays of sentimentality as a call to trolling. To the trolls
emotions are seen as a trap, something to exploit in others, to ignore or switch off in yourself (Phillips, 2015, p. 29). Several anons experience/pol/ primarily as a space for the production of transgressive lulz, to be amused and entertained at another’s expense. Combined with shitposting, the act of posting provocative content to derail a conversation off-topic, the experience of transgressive fun is a central factor driving users to socialize in chan subculture. ‘I did it 4 the lulz’, is a common explanation for laughing at racist content directed at people of colour, African Americans, Jews, Muslims, women and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people. By trolling outsiders, shitposting and wrapping racism in layers memetic irony, I suggest that users enter what Bateson (1955) calls a ‘play frame’ of exploratory behaviour. The paradoxical play frame is a psychological frame in which the user treats the activities that are occurring as both true and not true, serious and non-serious at the same time. As cyberfascism is promoted through memetic irony, it can lower the barrier for participating (Crawford et al., 2020). Many anons engaging in the production of fascist internet culture and aesthetics believe that there exists a fundamental difference between what they do as anons online and who they are as people in the real world. Even though some anons draw a distinction between online and offline behaviours, scholarship has shown that internet plays a central role in individual radicalization processes (Bowman-Grieve, 2019, p.2; Palmer, 2019). Digital subcultures are a major driving factor to establish and nurture enemy images and translate them into political action (Bowman-Grieve, 2019, p.2). Moreover, the absence of counter-voices at the chan platform reinforces the ‘echo chamber’ effect where users can attach their own viewpoint, yet obtain a sense of a cohesive ideological network. The users can thus experience a significant sense of agency and control through creative production of transgressive content, yet at the same time can radicalize by accepting conspiracy theories integral to white supremacy ideology. An affective politics of fear that dehumanizes people of colour and minorities as an existential threat to the white race can inspire users to violent action in the real world. As I will demonstrate in the following, the young, male users I observed at /pol/ are creatively engaged in the gendered reconfiguration of fascist content and promotion of the urgency of the need of a national or racial rebirth based on their ideals of a more pure, more heroic, more epic civilization (Griffin, 2018, p.5).

By examining /pol/’s visual culture, it is clear that the content, even if intended by the users to produce transgressive lulz, reflects a core feature of the fascist phenomena: the perception of an endangered community that need to be reborn through violent means.

5  |  MEMEIFYING FASCISM

The cyber fascism emerging at /pol/ relies heavily on memes to express and reinforce myths of threatening others. In the online realm, memes are considered to be ‘(a) a group of digital items sharing a common characteristic of content, form and/or stance; (b) that are created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). As such, ‘memes only make sense in relation to other memes and allow participants to speak clearly to other members of the collective while baffling those outside the affinity network (Phillips, 2015, p. 22). Memes work to reinforce the bond of the community and to mark in-group members from new or inexperienced users and to mere lurkers, members who observe, but do not participate (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). The mastering of memes functions as a gatekeeper, marking communal belonging to fellow anons and distance to normies, a slang pejorative label for individuals deemed to be conventional or mainstream.

At /pol/, the users typically employ memes to spread ideas and to mask offensive, disturbing, and racist material (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2018). During my collection period at /pol/, the most popular meme was that of Pepe the frog. The humanoid frog cartoon character that has been appropriated by the so-called Alt-Right and white supremacists since the 2016 US presidential election was among the top five most reposted memes. At /pol/, the frog is typically produced with symbols that reinforce white supremacist views. Pepe the frog is routinely depicted in Nazi uniforms, a Hitler-style moustache or other symbols associated with Nazism and earlier fascist movements. In other geographical locations, such as among pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, the frog has been transformed into a symbol of
resistance against the authoritarian state, illustrating the malleable meaning of memes as they are appropriated across contexts (Miller-Idriss, 2019).

While older fascist tropes are abundant at /pol/, new symbols and flow of signifiers are borrowed from digital, alt-right and gaming culture as well as popular cultural aesthetics, illustrating how memes entail a remixing of images for distributing views (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). An overwhelming part of the eclectic memes at /pol/ contains generalized dehumanizing and racist imaginary, playing on racial stereotypes, themes of racial impurity, and the threat of cultural differences. The users producing fascist content operate a ‘primordialist’ concept of the nation in tandem with scapegoating racial, religious and sexual minorities as existential threat to the purity, survival and superiority of the white ultra-nation. Other despised enemies are liberals, feminists and members of the left who are ascribed a ‘traitor’ status, as disloyal dangerous internal others facilitating the ‘great displacement’. Transnational organizations such as the EU or progressive ‘globalist’ politicians are blamed for destroying white nations through their alleged support for multiculturalism, feminism and antiracism.

The content posted by the self-identifying male users I observed routinely marked various out-groups as enemies of not only the white race and nation but also the white civilization as a whole. Antisemitism is the ‘master frame’ at /pol/ and by far the most prevalent form of online racism. Jews are framed as responsible for the ‘white genocide’. A much shared meme on /pol/ is the antisemitic Happy Merchant Meme, a cartoon that depicts a heavily stereotyped Jewish man with a black beard, long hooked nose, a hunched back, crooked teeth and who is greedily rubbing his hands. At /pol/, the meme is routinely posted alongside texts discussing how powerful Jews are behind societal ills and facilitating the ongoing white genocide (Figure 1).

The apocalyptic diagnosis emerging at /pol/ is contained in two conspiracy theories (Sunstein, 2014) which dominate the ideology of white supremacist globally—the great replacement theory and the white genocide theory. These interlinked conspiracy theories state that white people are systematically replaced by non-white people. Users who accept these conspiracy theories integral to /pol/ culture self-identify as redpilled, a phrase named after a Matrix reference, which seeks to awaken white men to the reality of the ongoing great replacement and repression caused by dominant feminist culture (DiBranco, 2017).

Unabashedly racist memes and texts are produced in multiple and intersecting ways. A central conspiracy theory on /pol/ is the notion that Jews use Muslims and migrants as a biological weapon to destroy the white race and as part of the plan to achieve world domination. Old antisemitic hatred about the Jew as disloyal figure seeking to destroy Western civilization by importing dangerous Muslims is coupled with an Islamophobic layer. The conspiracy theory of Eurabia—that Europe’s governments have secretly decided that Muslims should colonize Europe is also
abundant. At the heart of the Islamophobic content, propagated by the online lie the idea that Christian nations are threatened by a creeping and highly aggressive process of Islamization, with Muslims becoming a key enemy of the people. Such anti-Muslim hostility has been a well-documented phenomenon in Western Europe in the past decade (Esposito & Kalin, 2011).

At /pol/, variations of the great replacement theory are also routinely bound up with misogynistic discussions blaming women as the cause of falling birth rates as they reject traditional gender roles and embrace feminism. Users are routinely referencing white men’s sense of emasculation, loss of manhood and repression caused by dominant ‘feminist culture’ (DiBranco, 2017). /Pol/ is a notorious platform for the promotion of male sexual entitlement. Anons draw upon manosphere rhetoric to envision a hierarchical, patriarchal ideal world where white men are on the top (Ging, 2017). Traditional gender structures and roles such as childbearing and domestic labour are seen as essential to maintain the survival of the white race.

The gendered dimension of fascist ideology is evident. At /pol/, notions of masculinity are deployed as symbolic capital, ideological resource and as a rhetorical device to problematize the identities of those against whom they believe themselves fighting. Racialized and gendered images of ‘hypermasculine’ dark-skinned men that threatened the purity of the white ultra-nation are abundant. Routinely memes of the ‘Alfa-chad’ or incel (involuntary celibates) memes are posted alongside misogynist depictions of female others. Threads contain sexist advice and violent fantasies on how to seduce women in order to secure the future of the white race. One user posted an image of blond women encouraging violent rape to ensure racial palingenesis: ‘It cannot be so difficult, you just put it in’ combined with a white supremacist symbol. The racist memes circulating at /pol/ rely upon and reinforce the fantasy that the Western world has always been and must remain a white geographical space. At /pol/, it is evident that the fascist new order and the regeneration of the ultra-nation are conceived in transnational terms of European or Western renewal as a whole, thus promoting violent action globally.

6 | RACE WAR IN REAL LIFE

The racist content that characterizes the /pol/ discursive space is bound up with an awareness-raising type of warning aimed at providing a base for violent action against perceived enemies. Acting upon a diagnosis of an endangered ultra-nation, the radicalized anons present themselves as heroic race warriors ready to fight against the great replacement through violent means. The ultra-nation/race is in crisis and needs to be saved from its present state of disintegration through the agency of white men who are ready and prepared to fight to combat them.

While the vast majority of producers of conspiratorial fascist propaganda remain in virtual space, some have crossed the line from thought to action. At the extreme end of the white supremacist bloc at /pol/, anons dismiss the ‘softer’ alt-right actors as cowards unwilling to take matters into their own hands. They reject the effort to obtain political power through democratic elections as pointless. What red-pilled white supremacists should do is to accelerate violent societal collapse, that will lead to apocalyptic end times, and a race war, and then eventually to restoration and rebirth. The ultimate goal is to collapse the system they deem corrupt in order to secure a white-dominated future. Such palingenetic vision of rebirth and a new dawn are frequently referenced at /pol/ and in terrorist’s manifestos.

Moments before his mass murder of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, Australian white terrorist Brenton Tarrant posted a 74-page, 16,500 word manifesto at 8chan, an image and message board modelled after 4chan but committed to even less moderation. In a manifesto titled ‘The Great Replacement’, outlining his motivation for the attack, Tarrant justified mass murder as necessary to defend Europe against the ongoing ‘cultural and ethnic genocide’ being inflicted by multiculturalism and mass immigration. Tarrant viewed the world in Manichean terms, regarding Islam and Muslims a threat to the survival of the white nation itself. He called for all non-European immigrants ‘invading his land’ to be removed. Furthermore, he glorified the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik as his greatest inspiration, “shitposting” that he received a blessing from Brevik to carry out the attack (Tarrant, 2019).
Breivik, who on 22 July 2011 killed 77 adults and children in Norway, himself left behind a manifesto attacking ‘the radical feminist agenda’, Islam, political correctness and ‘cultural Marxism’. Breivik defined his cause as a defence against the perceived threat from Islam. Like Breivik, Tarrant eclectically mixed ideas from different ideologies and time periods in his self-proclaimed struggle against the alleged Muslim invasion of Europe. He placed himself in a longer historical line and mentioned the Battle of Vienna in 1683, when the Ottoman Empire was defeated.

Tarrant linked experienced threats from radical Islam in the past and present, referring to jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe while praising right-wing terrorism perpetrated in the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Sweden and Norway. The weapons magazines he used during the mass killings were covered with references to people with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant messages. He praised the name of the Swedish terrorist Anton Lundin-Petterson, the 21-year-old white Swede who in 2015 killed three people with a sword and seriously injured several others at a school in Trollhättan before being shot by the police. He praised Luca Traini, an Italian who opened fire on people of African origin in the town of Macerata in February 2018; Alexandre Bissonnette, the 2017 Quebec mosque killer; Dylan Roof, American white supremacist convicted for perpetrating the Charleston church shooting on 17 June 2015; and Darren Osborne, jailed for life for his murderous attack on Muslims in London in 2017. As such, Brenton Tarrant, while acting alone, placed himself in an imagined network of terrorists glorified as heroes fighting the great replacement.

Tarrant livestreamed the massacre from a helmet camera in a way that imitated a first-person shooter video game. While carrying out the mass shooting, he commented as if he was partly in a video game and partly on a chan message board. It is evident that Tarrant catered his livestreamed mass shooting not to address a random audience but to appeal to a chan subcultural milieu. Both Tarrant’s manifesto and the violent acts included multiple ‘shitposting’ references intentionally designed to troll outsiders and entertain and inspire insiders. By incorporating references to individuals like PewDiePie and Candace Owens, Tarrant tried to troll mainstream media and their coverage of the atrocities and keep himself relevant in the news cycle.

Tarrant forged a link between digital and gaming subculture, white supremacy propaganda and terrorist action, urging the readers of his manifesto and viewers of the livestreamed atrocities to: ‘Do your part in spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do.’ Tarrant wanted anons in the digital subculture to transform him into a meme, so he could spread his propaganda and inspire further action. Solidifying a template for other anons and would-be terrorists, Tarrant presented a model of cyberfascism transformed into terrorism where both thought and violent action would be propagated through memetic irony.

7 | MEMEIFYING TERRORISTS

Observing posting behaviour at /pol/ in the months following the Christchurch shooting, Tarrant’s fascist actions were glorified as a ‘living act’ carried out by a racial warrior determined to protect and bring about the palingenesis of the ultra-nation imagined as a white civilizational space. Anons would routinely praise Tarrant’s livestreamed massacre, producing and spreading gamified images of the atrocities. The attack was scored and rated like a video game, pointing to a wider trend emerging from this online milieu: the gamification of fascist propaganda and violence. Reducing victims to numbers and circulating gamified memes of the atrocities become integral to glorification of fascist violence at /pol/. Several post combined glorifications of violence through memetic irony with shitposting language characteristic of the subcultural style of communication.

One user posted in August 2019:

Brenton Tarrant is my favourite. His meme-themed shooting greatly represents the spirit of the aussie people, in the sense of shitposting until their last moment, based and redpilled he is. Just watched the video yet again. It was even better than last time. Make sure to put headphones on and turn off the light for the best experience.
Beyond circulating calls for violent action and inspiring more shooters, gaining status and recognition from other anons appeared to be an important motive. Within hours after the attack, anons celebrated the atrocities as an act of heroism and called for additional violence. /Pol/ was rife with sympathies for the terrorist, and users were openly expressing support for the atrocities and encouraged others to engage in violence. Hundreds of different memes praising Tarrant proliferated at /pol/ and were rapidly produced and circulated by users. Some memes were developed out of already familiar chan culture and imagery such as Pepe the frog (Figure 2), the Wajox Feel guy (Figure 3), the ‘Chad’ (alpha-male)-meme (Figure 4) or Japanese-style Manga. These memes in turn were combined with symbols associate with the Third Reich and white supremacy ideology such as ‘Blood and Soil’ and 1488 (14 stands for ‘We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children’ and 88 for ‘Heil Hitler’ (H being the eighth letter of the alphabet). One meme depicted Tarrant as Pepe the frog with a GoPro like device fastened to his helmet and the logo of his manifesto at the sleeve—a meme that praises Tarrant’s livestreaming of the Christchurch attack (Figure 2). Another user posted an image of Tarrant glorified through the meme of the Feels Guy, also know

**FIGURE 2**  Tarrant as Pepe the Frog meme [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

**FIGURE 3**  Tarrant as Feels Guy, also know as Wojak [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
as Wojak. The MS Paint illustration of a bald man is often used as a reaction image to represent feeling such as melancholy, regret or loneliness (knowyourmeme) (Figure 3).

On 4 August, a user self-identifying as Polish poses the following meme accompanied by the text ‘Knight Breivik and Saint Tarrant’ (Figure 5).
Another American anon posted a manipulated image of ‘The Republican club’ a painting hanging in the White House depicting Trump at a drinks table and surrounded by previous Republican presidents, dead and living. The painting is altered to include the faces of white terrorists, including Robert Bowers: the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, Dylan Roof, Adolf Hitler, Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant flashing a ‘white power’ sign in court (Figure 6).

8 | ACCELERATING THE RACE WAR

Memes of Tarrant at/pol/and are often coupled with calls for accelerating chaos and collapsing the current system. Anons encourage others to ‘take the action pill’, to go from memetic warfare in a digital media battlefield and commit violence in real life. On 6 August, a user located in the United States posted an image of Tarrant glorified with the Nazi symbol *sonnenrad* (sunwheel) and the text ‘The First of many, accept death embrace infamy’, encouraging anons to obtain fame for something that is deemed bad by normies in mainstream society (Figure 7).

At one archived thread, users are discussing and rating previous terrorist attacks and providing advice for future tactics, both aimed at producing *lulz* and encourage action.

Watching the Tarrant stream and he is totally calm and in control. As far as optics go I would love to see the next shooter utilize some trained dogs during his attack. Man’s best friend and symbol of the white race coordinating with the shooter would be pure joy.

Frequently Breivik and Tarrant are praised together as the ‘chads’ with both the highest ‘kill count’, longest preparation and best performance. An anon self-identifying as Australian compares the two terrorists to the shooter in Poway, El-Paso and Bærum.

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**FIGURE 6** The glorification of Tarrant and other white supremacy terrorists [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Breivik and Tarrant are a cut above the others and they had the wisdom that comes with age and put in a lot of planning. I still respect the others in that they took action but think youth and inexperience and their blood running hot reduced the possible impact.

An Italian user replies and compares the two terrorists claiming that Brevik did well to get rid of the ‘traitorous people’:

Breivik had 9 years of prep, and Brenton had 2. Which usually is what makes the difference in planned attacks, especially if they are done solo. I think Breivik is the one who got it best, who really struck at the heart of the issue. The island of Utøya was for decades the core of education and indoctrination centre of the Labor Party, which is the biggest party in Norway that favours, and promotes immigration and Islam. Some products of Utøya are Jens Stoltenberg (leader of NATO), Thorbjørn Jagland (the guy who gave the peace prize to Obama), Gro Bruntland (WHO leader) and others. Utøya was on the verge of creating the next generation of politicians, activists and ministers that would have held their hands in the future of Norway.

9 | SANCTIFYING TERRORISTS

Tarrant is routinely praised as a saint, the designation/pol term users assign to venerate the actions of the terrorists. Searching through archived threads from /pol/ at 4plebs.org, more than a thousand posts refer to Tarrant as saint. One thread is titled the ‘Saint Brenton Appreciation Thread’. Another ‘Saint Tarrant the Redeemer’, started by an American user, depicts Tarrant with a glory and holding his manifesto and a machine gun (Figure 5). On 23 July, a user claiming to be located in the United States posts the following alongside a meme of Tarrant portrayed with Christian saint iconography (Figure 7).

Everyday Tarrant still gives up his freedom, asking only to spread memes in this information war. Step it up 4chan pol, show Saint Tarrant the love he deserves, and help make a world for girls like Ebba.
And American user post on 11 August

Saint Tarrant (PBUH) of Grafton has become a household name. 27 years he will be free, 27 years there will be monuments to his deed. On March 15 2019 he entered history as the Firebrand Gallant. Ebba was only 11 years old when she was sacrificed on the altar of diversity. The white martyrs of Europe are forgotten no more.

The use of religious iconography and the saintification of Tarrant was applied by users at /pol/ to encourage calls for more acts of urgent violence in the real life. Tarrant’s manifesto and the livestreamed massacre, coupled with his saintification among /pol/ anons, inspired further attacks. In 2019, white supremacy terrorists targeted synagogues in the United States and Germany, mosques in Norway and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, near the border between the United State and Mexico, all referring to the Christchurch shooter as a source of inspiration.

Observing a meme posting in August 2019, multiple posts referred to how ‘the martyrs’ were growing. After the El-Paso attack on 4 August where Patrick Crusius (21) killed 21, a similar saintification of the terrorist occurred. Users from different continents posted the following: ‘Saint Brenton Tarrant, Saint Patrick Crusius, Blessed John Earnest’, illustrating how the anons themselves do not analyse the attack as a single, isolated event, but as an interconnected chain of violent action (Figure 8).

The strategy of sanctifying terrorists turns fascist rage into a call for further urgent action. A day before the Muslim celebration of Eid, on 18 August 2019, Philip Manshaus, a 21-year-old Norwegian white supremacist from Norway, first shot and killed his stepsister - Johanne Zhagjia Ihle-Hansen, who was adopted from China, before driving to the Al-Noor Islamic Center with the intended goal to kill ‘as many Muslims as possible’ (a goal he failed at after being overthrown by two elderly worshippers present). In a post on the day of the terrorist attack on the Al-Noor Islamic Center in Bærum, Manshaus shared a meme on Endchan where he linked himself to previous attacks. Manshaus praised Tarrant and considered himself ‘chosen’ as his third disciple after John Earnest (20 years) and Patrick Crusius (21 years) who also stated they were directly inspired by Tarrant. Alongside the meme, he posted the text: ‘My time is up, I was chosen by Saint Tarrant after all … We can’t let this continue, you gotta bump the race threat in real life … it’s been fun.’ Claiming to be inspired by Tarrant, Manshaus tried to imitate the Christchurch terrorist for both ideological references (white supremacy), target selection (mosque) and tactics. Moreover, like both Tarrant and the shooter in Poway, Manshaus tried to livestream his attack on Facebook, but failed to do so.

Immediately after the attack, anons started to mock Manshaus. One anon stated that he should have brought a machine gun so he could have killed more Muslims. On 19 August, as users comment: ‘It’s a shame that Manshaus failed. People should study the reasons for his failure and learn from it instead of mocking someone willing to sacrifice everything for his people’. Other anons deemed his attack a total failure, that he obtained a low

![The Chad Saint Brenton and his loyal Chad disciples John and Patrick](https://wileyonlinelibrary.com)
‘kill-score’. Some anons praised his contribution in fighting the great replacement stating ‘remember to add smiling Manshaus to the collection’. In the wake of the Bærum attack anons rated and compared the 2019 attacks, under threads such as ‘who is your favourite and who had the method you liked the most’. Several posts placed Manshaus at the bottom in contrast to Tarrant. On 16 August, a Canadian user posted a photo of Manshaus with the text: ‘Saint Tarrant inspired so many people and yet none have been able to even come close to his score we need more people to bump the race war.’ Still, in contrast to the ongoing saintification of Tarrant, only a handful of threads referred to Manshaus as saint, a category seemed to be reserved for anons turned terrorist who have obtained a high ‘kill-score’.

10 | CONCLUSION

This article has examined the transnational production of cyberfascism at 4chan /pol/. The technological affordances of the chan forum—with its anonymity and loose moderation—have helped white supremacists connect across continents. In a digital space characterized by content produced through transgressive play frames, users are more bound together by subcultural practices and posting behaviours than formal hierarchies and organizational structures. Functioning as a digital home for young, white men, the platform has enabled the collaborative production and spread of fascist content with multiple co-producers scattered across geographical contexts. In both classical fascism and its contemporary digital manifestations, fascist aesthetic is eclectic and is reproduced and spread with great speed and can be deployed as tools of propaganda (Walter, 1936). However, in contrast to classical fascism, cyberfascism is less guided by formal organization and hierarchies. At 4chan /pol/, users are situated in a transnational, leaderless network where they propagate and circulate intersecting enemy images through joking play frames. The digital subculture thus has significant space for creative agency and innovation, yet at the same time provides a sense of emotional control for the radicalized users who accept key racist and gendered tropes integral to conspiracy theories of the great replacement and white genocide. The echo chamber structure of /pol/, where core fascist believes are amplified and reinforced through memetic irony and repetition inside a transnational milieu, is powerful in the circulation of the logic of an ultra-nation under threat and worthy of violent defence. Producing and altering fascist memes quickly and anonymously, users create a sense of urgency that ‘race war in the real world’ is necessary to preserve white, male supremacy and obtain racial palingenesis and a reborn civilizational order. The terrorist attacks of 2019 drew its dynamics out of subcultural behaviours and affective structures at chan platforms. The attacks were preannounced at chan forums and carried out with subcultural references as if the terrorists were partly on an imageboard. Propaganda and violence were gamified and memified to troll outsiders and to further radicalize fellow anons.

The conspiratorial idea of an invasion of minorities and Muslim migrants led by traitorous elites is not only confined to digital subcultures but it has proven flexible enough to be used by authoritarian nationalists across contexts. Various far-right actors, from radical right parties to fringe far-right movements, are mobilizing the notions of the great displacement or the civilizational trope of a Muslim invasion of Europe and the Western world. In the United States, the QAnon conspiracy theory that originated in chan culture inspired the storming of Capitol Hill, an unprecedented attack on American democracy. Conspiracy theories thrive in crisis as they provide explanatory models for perceived chaos, simple explanations to events and clear enemy images. The past years have provided particular fertile ground for the reconfiguration and viral spread of conspiracy theories with far-right activists exploiting multiple destabilizing crises of economy, migration and pandemic to propagate their violent ideologies.

The violent escalations of cyberfascism propagated at chan platforms, where conspiracy theories are used in calls for the destruction of the current system in order to let a new one emerge, is a worrying trend. The terrorist attacks of 2019 illustrate how cyberfascism that mobilizes passions to violently fight for the endangered ultra-nation and civilization lends itself to offline violence. Adopting subcultural memetic irony and shitposting as styles of
communication when memeifying and saintifying the Christchurch shooter, the /pol/ users forged an inspirational cultural script for other anons that would imitate the violence based on the examples carried out at New Zealand.

The cyberfascism at /pol/ is characterized by eclectic play and transgressive visual culture, more than the level of static fixed-in-time text. It is in the space between agency and play provided by subcultural practices and order and control provided by evolving cultural scripts that /pol/ cyberfascism seems to draw its appeal. The anons can be active co-producers of memetic violence “apart together” that in turn can inspire other self-directed terrorists in murderous quests for supremacy and fame.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The research for this article was funded by the Research Council of Norway, The Granting Committee for the Humanities and Social Sciences (FRIHUMSAM) and forms part of the larger research project INTERSECT, project number 287230.

ENDNOTES
1 The image was first created by a white supremacist cartoonist and has been circulating in neo-Nazi circles since at least 2004 (Oboler, 2014) and has in recent years been adopted by the alt-right segment of the white supremacist movement.
2 The theory of the great displacement was popularized by the French author Renaud Camus in his 2011 book The Great Replacement and has since established itself in European and American far right politics. For example, Björn Höcke from Alternative für Deutschlands (AfD) warned in 2018 against the deaths that will come as a result of ‘The Great Replacement’. Heinz-Christian Strache, former leader of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, uses the term. So does Marion Marechal-Le Pen from the French National Collection and Dries Van Langenhove from the Vlaams Belang party in Belgium. The rhetoric of white population replacement is also part of the worldview of heads of state such as Viktor Orbán and Matteo Salvini. Rasmus Paludan, leader of the immigration and Islamist enemy Danish microparty Stram Kurs, in August, a few days after the terror attack in Barum, he announced an event in Oslo entitled ‘the great displacement’ (The Literature House in Oslo came out with a press release announcing that they did not allow the politician to hold the event on their premises). He claims that Danish asylum and immigration policy have led to demographic change that poses an existential threat to ethnic Danes. There are evident parallels between the racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric of some far-right politicians and the white terrorists’ justification for their attacks.
3 The three slain victims, Lavin Eskadar (20), Ahmed Hassan (15) and Nazir Amso (42), were Swedes with migrant backgrounds whom the killer targeted due to his perception of them as non-white. The killer chose to spare schoolchildren whom he perceived as ‘ethnically Swedish’.

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How to cite this article: Thorleifsson, C. (2021). From cyberfascism to terrorism: On 4chan/pol/ culture and the transnational production of memetic violence. Nations and Nationalism, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12780