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## REDDIT'S COMMUNITIES & CONSEQUENCES

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As a platform, Reddit provides a bit of a conundrum. Despite being visited by more people than Netflix and remaining one of the most visited spaces on the web (more than one in ten American adults used Reddit in 2019, according to Pew), it remains extraordinarily resistant to generalization. Some of the worst of internet culture can be found on the site. It has served to amplify the voices of misogynists, supported vigilantism, and hosted child pornography. At the same time, some of the more civil conversations and learning communities appear on the site, with subreddits like Change My View fostering respectful deliberation. Even more than many other platforms, the lack of centralized moderation means that Reddit contains a very wide range of practices, some of them quite extreme. But because these exist on a single platform, users bring these practices with them, both to the “front page” of the platform, and to other areas within.

The three papers that make up this panel seek to better understand localized behaviors and how they may relate to global flows of participants and practices. Of course, many of the discursive patterns that were fostered in subreddits make their way into other online and offline contexts--as anyone who has been called a “cuck” can tell you. But before they do that, they have often been produced as part of a culture local to one

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subreddit, or to a “neighborhood” of subreddits. How these practices emerge, evolve, and relate to the actions of their users runs as a thread through the three presentations.

Adrienne Massanari begins the session with a discussion of the “dark play” that takes place on a subreddit that has become the base not just for support for Donald Trump, but much of the alt-right: The Donald. A close textual reading and critical discourse analysis of the subreddit reveals the ways in which Trump fandom is performed as a form of play that helps to constitute community, recreating the Trump rally within a subreddit.

Alexander Halavais presents an analysis of the neighborhood structure of Reddit: the ways in which subreddits cluster, and how this affects the spread of ideas and practices on the network. Reddit remains disproportionately understudied when compared with other popular platforms, and much of the work that has approached it has focused either on the platform as a whole, or more often on particular (sometimes representative) subreddits. Contributor Two argues that mapping the structure of Reddit grounds an understanding of how ideas move between them. More importantly, it suggests how practices and discursive expectations--both prosocial and potentially harmful--move through the corridors of Reddit.

Appropriately, in the last paper, Kelly Bergstrom and Nathaniel Poor explore the process by which people exit their communities on Reddit. The question of why people leave communities is a long-standing one, but the trace data provided by Reddit allows for this history to be explored more directly, up through their final farewells. Understanding these as cases where individuals are unable to find lasting community provides an opportunity to understand part of the impetus for migration, and the ways in which this informs our view of Reddit as a community of communities.

The panelists have created a brief discussion of issues around research and reddit that we will upload as part of the online content for the conference.

## **DARK PLAY, FANDOM, AND REDDIT'S /R/THE\_DONALD**

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Reddit, the popular social news/community site, has been long known for its transgressive, carnivalesque humor. But it has also gained increasing media attention for the toxic content that circulates many of its communities (subreddits) given the administrator's hands-off approach to content moderation (Massanari, 2015). The platform has also become a hub for the "alt-right" in the US: a loose coalition of "intellectuals" like Richard Spencer, racialsists from active white nationalist groups, denizens of 4chan's /pol board, and meninists (incels, men's rights activists, and other anti-feminists) (Wendling, 2018). As Matthew Lyons (2017) argues, individuals affiliated with this loose coalition demonstrate, "a contempt for both liberal multiculturalism and mainstream conservatism; a belief that some people are inherently superior to others; a strong internet presence and embrace of specific elements of online culture; and a self-presentation as being new, hip, and irreverent." However, little is understood about how these groups leverage the sociotechnical affordances of platforms like Reddit and weaponize its culture of play.

In this paper, I explore the ways in which a kind of "dark play" has been normalized on Reddit, focusing on /r/The\_Donald (TD), a popular community (subreddit) for supporters of Donald Trump. Dark play subverts the play frame, blurring the lines between play and not-play (Schechner, 1995). In "alt-right" communities dark play might take many forms, from subtle dog-whistles in humorous memetic content, to "trolling," to outright harassment and intimidation. Using TD as a case study, this work reveals the discursive tactics and approaches used to both build community among subscribers as well as spread disinformation and foment dissent more broadly.

### **Play and dark play**

Scholars have noted that play is an integral part of human culture, often set aside from "ordinary" life and governed by its own set of rules (Caillois, 2001). It is contradictory; simultaneously "not serious" and yet, utterly absorbing (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Sicart, 2014; Sutton-Smith, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in a particular form of play: what performance theorist Richard Schechner (1995) terms "dark play." Despite its potential usefulness for understanding all kinds of rituals, performances, and collective action, dark play remains relatively undertheorized. Schechner notes,

Dark play may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark, when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing.... Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed.... Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public) dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification (p. 36).

Dark play creates a space where one or all of the players may be unaware that a game is being played or that the space even delineated for play.

Online spaces are ripe for new and effective forms of dark play as memetic logics that underpin them remain relatively impenetrable to outsiders. And it is enabled by the ways online spaces amplify and render more salient popular content through algorithms and the technological affordances they offer users (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). As Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) argue, the internet trades in a kind of “ambivalence” that is inherently polysemous and dialectical. The dark play of the “alt-right” takes advantage of this ambivalence to spread far-right ideology while simultaneously disavowing it as mere play or “trolling.”

### **Method**

This case study is based on a close textual reading and critical discourse analysis of The\_Donald (TD) subreddit and associated media coverage (Fairclough, 2010) prior to the subreddit’s quarantine in June 2019. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) engages in an examination of texts with particular attention to issues of power in an effort to critique and change social realities. I have also employed techniques drawn from visual studies to analyze how the verbal and visual elements reinforce (or contradict) one another (Rose, 2016). The primary question guiding my analysis is, “How does /r/The\_Donald create community through dark play?”

In the next section, I briefly discuss one finding from this project: the way dark play envisions Trump supporters as fans.

### **/r/The\_Donald as fandom community**

Recasting support for Donald Trump through the lens of fandom becomes a critical way in which “dark play” occurs on the subreddit. Theorists have tended to emphasize the democratic, liberatory potential of fandom, and the possibility it offers for political activism around social issues (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). However recent events like #Gamergate remind us that fan communities are often divisive, exclusionary, and toxic (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Paul, 2018).

Trump-as-candidate implicitly understood and was motivated by the idea of the fan (note his repeated use of the term “fan” throughout the campaign) and created catchphrases “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) that were memorable and potent. In turn, his supporters (particularly those from 4chan and Reddit), anointed him their “God Emperor” – a larger-than life figure that was part relatable everyman, part untouchable superhero.

/r/The\_Donald’s description mirrors this move from mere supporter to fan:

Be advised this forum is for serious supporters of President Trump. We have discussions, memes, AMAs, and more. We are not politically correct.

The description implies that there is a difference between supporters and “serious” supporters – the former perhaps being more likely to question other participants or even challenge Trump’s policies. It also suggests that any disagreements that might happen

between “serious supporters” are not fundamentally ideological in nature. The subreddit instead serves as a simulation of one of Trump’s rallies, where dissent is muted, and where harassment, intimidation, and violence by Trump fans is tacitly accepted.

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## **THE NICER NEIGHBORHOODS OF REDDIT**

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It was the best of Reddits, it was the worst of Reddits. Like any social platform, Reddit contains multitudes of social interaction. Thanks in part to its decentralization, Reddit seems to mark out these extremes. On one end, this means that it supports “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017), as home to the “fapping” and subreddits dedicated to incels, child pornography, and images of women who have been beaten. On the other, some of the richest examples of deliberation and scientific exploration can be found on the site, reflecting some of the loftiest ideals of the early open internet (Borge Bravo & Sáez, 2016; Halavais, 2013). In some subreddits, both are found at the same time (Buozis, 2019). By understanding how these neighborhoods of Reddit are related, we can understand how discursive practices--both prosocial and less so--move among these spaces.

Generally, the Reddit you see is determined by the subreddits you subscribe to and visit, just as two people living in a large city are likely to have very different experiences of that city, depending on their home neighborhood. Can we find similar neighborhoods in Reddit: clusters of subreddits that tend to make up shared space? If so, how are these neighborhoods related? Are there areas of Reddit that are more deliberative, more supportive, or kinder? Does nearness, in terms of co-membership, allow for the sharing of ideas? Of cultural values and discursive styles?

The work presented here shows that there are cohesive neighborhoods on Reddit and presents some of the ways of determining these neighborhoods (and the assumptions those approaches make), and ways of working with these maps.

Mapping these spaces provides a framework for answering other questions. What are the differences between those who stay within their “home” communities and those who roam? Do users code-switch, or do they use the patterns of interaction from one space in the other contexts they participate in? Finally, are there design cues that may be drawn from this user behavior?

### **Detecting Neighborhoods**

There is a long history of attempting to find the borders of communities based on areas of density and sparseness within networks (Fortunato, 2010). There are a number of ways you might identify which of the over one million subreddits should be included in an analysis, and then how these are related. While arguments could be made for using individual redditor’s subscriptions, posting, comments, or reading to determine shared

interest between subreddits. Some of this is determined by the availability of data: it is difficult to know what subreddits are regularly visited and read by redditors, although reading posts and comments is by far the most frequent activity on the site. Here, the Pushshift collection is used (Baumgartner et al., 2020), which includes data on each post and comment made. The focus on discursive communities and civility means that comments posted represent the best way to tie subreddits.

Taking the top ten thousand subreddits, by number of comments in the previous year, a network is constructed based on comments made by individual reddit accounts. This network is then clustered into 36 groups, and distributed according to the top interlinkages and secondary linkages in terms of shared commenters in order to better visualize this space. But beyond providing a way of thinking about how subreddits might be related, this gives us a set of weighted pairwise connections between popular subreddits that can help us to understand a range of questions relating to the spread of information and practices across Reddit neighborhoods.

### **Tracing the Contagion of Interactive Strategies**

A great deal of work has been done to understand how viral content spreads across various parts of the internet. We might expect that discursive practices follow similar lines. But since such practices rely on social consensus, are they less likely to spread from the contexts in which they emerge? Do the practices--formal and informal--that allow for "Change My View" to work then lead to users who bring these styles of deliberation to other spaces on Reddit? Do some of the more toxic subreddits tend to spread their less convivial styles. (Given new restrictions put in place by many subreddits, which reject postings by users with substantial contributions to subreddits that have been quarantined thanks to violations of the Reddit terms, there seems to be some suggestion of such a relationship.)

A number key terms terms have been associated with groups that tend toward the extreme right on Reddit--indeed one of these "red pilling" has now largely passed into the common vernacular. Tracing the use of these terms by users within the neighborhoods of the alt-right to other communities provides an indication that connection strength and shared membership tends to lead to "leakage" of some of these ideas and forms of argument.

Identifying markers of healthy deliberation is harder. An initial qualitative exploration of user's adoption of the standards of Change My View, and the degree to which this affects their participation in other subreddits, is offered. The intent is to provide ways of automatically identifying and tagging deliberative processes so as to measure this at scale across the landscape of Reddit.

Understanding the vast variety of interaction that occurs on platforms--and in this case, on Reddit--provides both a wider understanding of discourse communities, and the means of intervening on platforms to foster sociable spaces.

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# LEAVING REDDIT COMMUNITIES: A LARGE SCALE ANALYSIS

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## Introduction

Reddit, the self-proclaimed “front page of the internet”, is currently one of the most visited sites on the Internet (as reported by Amazon’s Alexa.com metrics). Every day, millions of users post comments and replies in thousands of online communities. These communities, called subreddits, range in topic from games, to funny pictures of cats, to extreme conspiracy theories. Communication on Reddit is relatively anonymous, as posting comments requires only a username and password with no personally identifying information required. These communities, formed by communication (Dewey, 1927), have norms for behavior, ranging from subreddit-specific norms (Bergstrom, 2011) to higher-level norms that are expected across the entire site (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018). Subreddits are started by, and run by, the users, and Reddit employees generally take a hands-off approach to content. However, Reddit has also been the subject of intense scrutiny at various times: for its problematic role in the search for the Boston Marathon Bombers (Kaufman, 2013), trading sexually explicit photographs of minors (Chen, 2011), as well as documented problems with both bigotry (Massanari, 2017) and violence (Robertson, 2019).

Despite the critiques of the more toxic elements of the site, Reddit has also become home to smaller sub-communities who have managed to carve out safe enclaves and persist using the site where the larger community may not be so welcoming (Massanari, 2019). While such case studies are important to understand the (sub)community based culture and norms associated with Reddit, the research presented in this paper seeks to better understand what happens to the users who *do not* find such enclaves and ultimately cease participating in the site and the communities where they were posting.

## Disengaging from online communities

Investigations into why users leave other online communities, such as the communities that invariably form around online multiplayer games, found that players often leave for reasons beyond a personal lack of interest and instead there are internal or external forces that push a user towards disengagement (Bergstrom, 2019; Jiang, 2018; Poor & Skoric, 2014). Our goal here is to better understand why users disengage from Reddit. Community is vital to humanity (Dunbar, 2005), we evolved to communicate and form community (Gamble, Gowlett, & Dunbar, 2014), and our communication capabilities and communities far surpass those of other species (Tomasello, et al., 2009). Communities give us life, while exile and excommunication can mean death to individuals when we are discussing real-world and historical communities. Online communities can and do provide much in the way of emotional and information support, as much research has shown. However, they are far easier to leave: one merely needs to stop logging in to the

system, as many people do and have done over time with online platforms including Reddit. Leaving would mean the loss of these resources (emotional and informational), as well as the loss of any personal ties that had been formed. When an individual leaves a community, it also means that the community loses the resources of that person (emotional support, informational support, and emotional ties). Losing the wrong person, or too many people, can destabilize a community. Thus, one person leaving can be a problem for both that person and the community itself. Our focus in this research is to better understand why users leave Reddit.

## Study Design

To address this question, we employ large-scale network analysis techniques to track the events leading up to a user's disengagement with the site and the community with which they had participated. We study these events by drawing on millions of Reddit posts: 52 million posts from Reddit's launch in 2005 to 2014, and then a second set (to be collected) from then to December, 2019. Trace ethnography (Geiger & Ribes, 2011) has shown that the data left behind by users is rich and meaningful, in this case we examine posts made by a Reddit account that exists yet is no longer active on the site—abandoned yet not deleted. However, isolating the moment that a user stops participating is only part of the picture. Drilling down, we employ the methods outlined by Nelson (2017) to determine the conditions under which previously prolific posters decide to no longer engage with the site, if indeed they have left hints or notices in their final posts. While still a work in progress, this paper will report on research to date about why users quit Reddit, if these reasons have shifted over time.

Trying to discover if users of a platform give hints (or even direct notice) of their imminent departure can help identify what the reasons for their leaving are, and can in turn suggest actions that may help these communities retain users and thus retain cohesion over time. Community stability is important as stable communities are better positioned to give the various types of support that communities give to the individuals who comprise those communities.

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