

The community I chose was the /b/ board at [4chan.org](http://4chan.org), a site dedicated to imageboards, which is basically an image-driven forum, where all posting is done anonymously, and with no means of defining who is posting what or when. The members of /b/ are collectively referred to as 'Anonymous', a group now notorious for its protests and attacks on Scientology.

### **The Way /b/ Works**

The boards work thusly: Any user may anonymously, and without fear of censorship, post an image with accompanying text, thus starting a thread, to which other users may respond including images or not, and each post (and thread) is given a unique code which may be quoted. Threads have a maximum number of images that may be posted, and a maximum number of replies, after which it is deleted, and similarly there are 15 pages of threads currently, ranked by the number of views and replies. After a page reaches the last page, it is deleted. On the most popular boards, the page turnover can be very quick, with a poor thread lasting only a few minutes. This transitory nature is, in the opinion of the site's creator, Christopher Poole, also known as Moot, in direct opposition to Facebook, where everything is attributable and preserved indefinitely[2]. There is no fear of retribution or tarnishing of reputation, so users can communicate things they could never express in the real world.

The content of the images, and accompanying text, can consist of anything, (given that /b/ is the 'Random' board, where the others are themed, i.e., /mu/ is about music, /r/ is for requests, etc.) and is often humorous, offensive, racist, or gory/violent. There is an emphasis on Japanese culture, and indeed the imageboard format is borrowed from Japan, namely the Futaba and Yotsuba boards, a heritage acknowledged in the available visual styles. /b/ is certainly not suitable for anyone of a soft disposition, or viewing in the workplace, and great discretion is advised. However, from this anarchic and unfettered pool of content and interaction between strangers come many of the memes that now circulate the Internet. 'A meme is a postulated unit of cultural ideas, symbols or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena.'[13]. On the Internet a meme usually refers to a viral idea of phrase for "Epic Fail" which originated from the 4chan.org board. Other examples of the memes created are 'lolcats', which are simply images of cats with text applied, Rickrolling, where a link purporting to be relevant to the victim's interest is replaced with a link to a music video, that of Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up', and countless others with more or much less savory natures.(12)

The main aim is to amuse, shock, and, arouse the other members within the simple format provided. This is often achieved by 'trolling', which is basically doing whatever necessary to provoke a reaction from a (generally less experienced) user. /b/ is effectively made up entirely of trolls, and as such, anything read or seen there cannot be trusted in any way.

The user base is mainly male, (65%), caucasian, and college-educated. [ref <http://www.4chan.org/advertise/> ] 4chan attracts 700,000 unique visitors daily, and most of these are to the most popular and fastest-moving board, /b/. As

stated, the primary activity is the posting and discussion, loosely speaking, in and around images (referred to as 'macros' in site parlance) and sometimes links to videos. Japanese culture, anime, manga, video games, comics, technology, music and entertainment are the main areas of general interest.[1] /b/, in particular, is also a news hub, for example, and in particular, when a celebrity or public figure dies, it will often be announced on /b/ well before the mainstream media has heard about it, and will generally be followed by tasteless jokes and ridicule. As may be gathered, /b/ is exceedingly coarse, with no boundaries as to what may be ridiculed. The particular kind of black humor sought after at /b/ is referred to as 'the lulz', a 'corruption of LOL', [ref lol] broadly meaning to laugh at the expense of others, with a rather dark undertone. However, this chaotic mass can also organize to achieve things impossible by other means.

The macro is an interesting media in and of itself. Macros are reposted and modified by users, for example, the 'Advice Dog' style meme, which has a picture of a puppies' head over a background of radial colors, and has 'advice' in text above and below the animal. The 'advice' is often offensive and/or humorous, in the fashion of the site. This macro evolved into several different variations, such as Courage Wolf, Technologically Impaired Duck, and Philosoraptor, all using the same basic template for a 'new' meme. (11)

### **Raids, Stunts And Activism: The Things That Happen On /b/**

At the time of writing, the Anonymous collective is currently planning a 'raid' of Tumblr.com, a blogging site, due to reappropriation of /b/- generated memes and content by Tumblr users. A separate project decrying this raid, and attempting to turn users away from this activity, sprung up within hours of the raid being proposed, indicative of the now-fractious nature of the site, which stemmed from the biggest raid that occurred in the history of the site, Project Chanology. A 'raid' is an attack on another website through use of spamming, generally consisting of 'copypasta' (text which has been copied from a source and repeatedly pasted into posts, etc.), DDoS attacks, (Distributed Denial of Service, where a site's servers are overloaded by spurious queries, often until the server fails), and hacking, both of sites and user accounts, often using public humiliation. (10)(12)

A raid occurs after enough posts by members on the same topic, namely, a person or group who have done something that is considered unacceptable. These posts will occur more frequently and gather more attention until a member or members suggest a raid, and the thread is continued past post limits for as long as it takes to organize. Due to the transient nature of threads, an IRC channel (def) will be set up to coordinate efforts and agree on approaches, and pass on information on site weaknesses and exploits. In the case of the Scientology raid, in January 2008, and later known as Project Chanology, the techniques used were all of the above, as well as 'IRL' (in real life) actions, such as sending pizzas, etc, to Scientology centers, 'blackfaxing', which is repeatedly sending a black page to a fax repeatedly, causing it to run out of ink, and various other pranks, which, while merely annoying or an inconvenience singly, may have serious implications when performed simultaneously and en masse.

From this came a more conventional, if often bizarre, protest centered on Scientology centers in major cities. Many protestors wore Guy Fawkes masks, (taken from the film 'V For Vendetta', but having another significance in the /b/ memetic lexicon, being the face of EFG, or Epic Fail Guy, who, according to the meme, cannot ever 'win' at anything (6)), Protestors also carried placards bearing memes and anti-Church slogans, and practiced 'IRL Rickrolling', the playing of the aforementioned song repeatedly and at volume. The given reason for Chanology was an incident where a Scientology video starring Tom Cruise, a high-ranking member of the Church, was leaked, and then removed from the Internet by the Church, who issued legal threats and litigation, which were decried as characteristic of the heavy-handed methods of the Church in dealing with criticism. (3)(4) Anonymous also had criticism about the treatment of members and ex-members, the financial demands made on members, and various other aspects of Scientology, and called for an investigation by the IRS into the tax-exempt status of the Church. (2) A video was issued on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) by a member of Anonymous, consisting of a computer-generated voice over a backdrop of clouds reciting the following text:

"Hello, Scientology. We are Anonymous. Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation; suppression of dissent; your litigious nature, all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who trust you, who call you leader, has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind--for the laughs--we shall expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form. We acknowledge you as a serious opponent, and we are prepared for a long, long campaign. You will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic. Your methods, hypocrisy, and the artlessness of your organization have sounded its death knell.

You cannot hide; we are everywhere". (8)

This video was seized by Scientology as evidence of persecution, and the story was picked up by the mainstream media, provoking debate about the nature of Scientology, and suddenly propelling the once-obscure [4chan.org](http://4chan.org) into broader notoriety(9). However, the sudden influx of new users, unaccustomed to the culture at /b/, caused discontent, and Anonymous became a separate group dedicated to Project Chanology, (though the term is still used at 4chan to describe members) and the protests continue still. (10) This kind of activism still comes from 4chan, more recently in the DDoS attacks on anti-piracy and intellectual rights organizations. (10)

In summation, the nature of 4chan is a complex and often impenetrable one. The content and output ranges from puerile humor, and the plain disgusting, to giving rise to a new form of collective activism and resistance. It is unique in its ability to form resonances among strangers in a dynamic and ephemeral

fashion, and marred by constant infighting and user migrations, but the Internet would certainly be a different place without it.

## References and Links

- (1) <http://www.4chan.org/advertise/>
- (2) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/09/AR2010080906102.html?sid=ST20100809061>
- (3) <http://gizmodo.com/5590049/why-do-anonymous-geeks-hate-scientologists>
- (4) <http://www.chillingeffects.org/search.cgi?search=scientology>
- (5) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNO6G4ApJQY>
- (6) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/epic-fail-guy>
- (7) <http://www.whyweprotest.net/en/>
- (8) [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Message\\_to\\_Scientology.ogv](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Message_to_Scientology.ogv)
- (9) [http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/%22Anonymous%22\\_releases\\_statements\\_outlining\\_%22War\\_on\\_Scientology%22](http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/%22Anonymous%22_releases_statements_outlining_%22War_on_Scientology%22)
- (10) [http://news.cnet.com/8301-31001\\_3-20022264-261.html](http://news.cnet.com/8301-31001_3-20022264-261.html)
- (11) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-dog>
- (12) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-10520487>
- (13) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>

## A day in the life of an Anon

I wake up, make coffee, and open three sites in my browser; my email, news feed, and /b/. It's rather quiet at this time, but once in a while, I'll strike gold, like a fresh and still-funny meme, or a well-executed combo (a series of images with purpose), or, once upon a time, a GET, which would brighten up my morning. A GET is when a post is assigned a notable number, like one million. Whatever it was would be reposted for days and become a mini-meme of sorts. If I have time, I might join in with a macro or a crude picture made in MS Paint. Once I get to work, I can't possibly lurk on /b/ without running the risk of getting fired, so I must wait until I get home to rejoin the melee. With more time on my hands, I will have multiple threads open, refreshing each of them periodically, more so on ones I've posted in or created. It's quite possible to be engaged in simultaneous debates about philosophy, heavy metal, Internet neutrality, and religion, to choose the safest topics! Sometimes I'll draw a joke in comic form and post it, or contribute to an OC (original content) thread, though it's impossible to tell if something has been done before or not. There's always a chance the thread will die before you have a chance to submit it, too, which is rather annoying. 4chan has had a lot of problems with spam and attacks, due to the anonymous nature of posting, and the fact that 4chan causes hassle for many other communities in the quest for 'lulz'.

Sometimes, a raid will be proposed that looks either too funny, or rarely, worthwhile to participate in. This can involve fake user accounts at the site, or use of the LOIC (Low Orbit Ion Cannon, a DDoS program) to simply take the site down. DDoS attacks, when used for valid protests, at least, can be very

exciting to engage in; it's perhaps akin to laying siege to a castle. Some of the most fun to be had is when a 'newfag' (normal term for a new user; most terms used for people are offensive) arrives and tries to act cool. Suffice to say, it's no less fun for being an easy target. Eventually, it gets boring, all the threads that interest me die, and it's time to do something else. However, I'm always looking out for images to upload tomorrow, and maybe text to put over it, because you never know what will take off. 4chan is a strange kind of freedom, but an important one, I think.