

Undergraduate Research Symposium May 17, 2013 Mary Gates Hall

Online Proceedings

SESSION 1G

ONLINE SPACES: THE EPHEMERA AND RITUAL, THE ARTISTIC AND SUBVERSIVE

*Session Moderator: Kristin Gustafson, School of
Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, UW Bothell*

242 MGH

1:15 PM to 2:45 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

NSFW: The Subversive Cultural Logic of Anonymous Online Culture

Jordan Augustine, Senior, English

Mary Gates Scholar

Mentor: Jose Antonio Lucero, International Studies

*Mentor: Carolyn Pinedo Turnovsky, American Ethnic
Studies & Law, Societies and Justice*

Mentor: Raj Chetty

Mentor: Simon Trujillo

NSFW (“Not Safe For Work”) is an acronym used to indicate that a website, a picture, or a link contains inappropriate (usually pornographic) content. One could say that all of 4chan.org is NSFW. 4chan is an imageboard where communication takes place in the form of pictures and images posted by anonymous users and deleted minutes after they appear online. This anonymity and ephemerality of communication unleashes levels of racism, sexism, homophobia, and general malevolence unseen in Social Web communities like Facebook. However, 4chan operates with virtually no advertisement (or profit-motive) while Facebook is now a publicly traded corporation, with a mandate to generate revenue for its stockholders by monetizing its assets, which happen to be the words, pictures, jokes, and plans of its more than 1 billion users. Discourses surrounding the Social Web speak in terms of “openness,” “connectivity,” and “transparency,” promising a more civil online community. However, these trends make personal data and communication susceptible to appropriation by capital. How has 4chan remained a largely non-commodified space in the midst of the corporate colonization of the Social Web, and what do we make of its sociopathic ethos? I studied the community and signifying practices of 4chan’s random board /b/, finding that although

the fundamental anonymity and ephemerality of communication on the board free up participants to be racist, sexist, homophobic, and generally malevolent to degrees unseen in the Social web, these same conditions create a space for truly free speech (in both the monetary and behavioral sense), creating a novel mode of signification and a space for subversive political consciousness in the process.