

# 4chan.org

A platform housing online forums rife with pornography, xenophobia, and violent imagery that is run largely by volunteers. 4chan routinely spreads conspiracy theories and other harmful content.



This website is a platform that publishes content from its users that it does not vet. Information from this source may not be reliable.

## Ownership and Financing

4chan is owned by Hiroyuki Nishimura, an influential Japanese internet entrepreneur, through 4chan Community Support LLC, a privately held company registered in Delaware. Nishimura is the founder, former owner, and administrator of 2channel (now 5channel), a popular Japanese site similar to 4chan. 2channel led to the creation of Futaba Channel (another Japanese site, also known as 2chan), which served as inspiration for 4chan's creation.

Nishimura also helped develop and promote Nico Nico Douga, a popular Japanese video-sharing site that translates to Smiley Smiley Video and is also known as Nicodou. In 2013, according to The Japan Times, Nishimura paid about ¥30 million (\$269,000) in tax penalties after not disclosing approximately ¥100 million (\$898,000) of income.

The site earns revenue through advertising and a premium membership option called 4chan Pass, which makes it easier for users to post content and allows them to post more frequently.

Christopher Poole, 4chan's founder and former administrator, told Rolling Stone in 2015 — the year he left 4chan — that he never made money off the site and that at one point he was \$20,000 in debt and had to move back in with his mother. In 2016, Nishimura wrote in a 4chan post that the site couldn't "afford infrastructure costs, network fee, servers cost," and other basic services.

## Content

4chan is rife with pornography and other posts that many would consider shocking or inappropriate, such as violent imagery and offensive language, including racial slurs. Anyone can post images and text on

4chan, which describes itself on a Frequently Asked Questions page as “a simple image-based bulletin board” with a “collaborative-community format.” Users can choose to identify themselves or post anonymously, although the site has no formal registration system. Content appears on “boards,” which are sorted into seven main categories — Japanese Culture, Video Games, Interests, Creative, Other, Misc., and Adult. The latter two categories are labeled as NSFW (not safe for work).

Each board focuses on a particular topic, which can be general (Sports, Random, Comics & Cartoons), more focused (Otaku Culture, LGBT), or X-rated. Boards are often referred to using the last portion of their web address (for example, /lit/). 4chan featured 70 boards as of April 2019. Boards are made up of threads containing an original post (which must include an image) and replies to that post. Each post within a thread has a number, and users sometimes try to time their posts so that they get a special number (referred to as “GETs”), such as “1234567” or “7777777.”

Threads are automatically deleted from the site after they are knocked off the last page (typically the 10th page) of their corresponding board. Some boards have an archive of threads that have expired within the previous three days. Users can read threads in an archive, but cannot add to them. When a user replies to a thread, it is “bumped” to the top of the page, unless the user indicates that they do not want the thread to be bumped. All threads have a “bump limit,” which varies from board to board. Threads can also be pinned (“stickied”) to the top of a board. In April 2019, 4chan reported that there were more than 3 billion posts on the site.

Users often include terms unique to 4chan, such as “sauce” (used to ask for a source for a claim, image, or video) and “s---posting” (the act of creating intentionally bad posts for fun).

The most popular 4chan boards include Random (/b/), a smorgasbord of memes, pranks, and controversies that was the first board added to the site; Politically Incorrect (/pol/), a section intended for the

discussion of politics and other current events, which is often filled with fringe ideas, racism, and other types of xenophobia; and Video Games (/v/), another one of 4chan's oldest boards.

4chan is credited as the originator of many popular internet memes and subcultures, such as "lolcats" (photographs of cats on which humorous captions are pasted, typically in misspelled and grammatically incorrect English), "Rickrolling" (the practice of directing unrelated links to the music video for Rick Astley's 1987 hit "Never Gonna Give You Up"), and "bronies" (men who are fans of the "My Little Pony" franchise.)

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#### Credibility

Content on 4chan is primarily regulated by its administrator and dedicated volunteers. 4chan has 17 rules that apply to the entire site and additional regulations that vary by board. For example, users of the Advice (/adv/) board are instructed that the board "is the destination for all questions regarding specific personal problems," but that they should not post "hookup or camwhore threads" and that "venting is discouraged."

4chan's global rules ban content that "violates local or United States law," but violent, sexual, and hateful content are allowed on certain boards. Users under the age of 18 are prohibited, although the site has no reliable way to enforce this rule, since users can choose to be anonymous. "Doxxing" (publishing private or identifying information about an individual on the internet) and "raids" (when multiple users spam a specific board or thread) are also forbidden. Rules specific to each board typically address the type of content they allow. The Random (/b/) board has no rules, aside from the ones that apply to the entire site.

4chan's rules do not prevent conspiracy theories, hoaxes, cyberbullying, and other harmful content from proliferating on the site. A June 2018 Wired article stated that "nearly every evil of the internet begins, or picks up steam, on the site."

Many false claims about the COVID-19 pandemic have appeared on the site, including the debunked claims that Bill Gates is somehow responsible for the pandemic, that it is a hoax, and that it is a "bioweapon."

For example, an April 2020 post titled "Covid 19 bioweapon" stated: "What a fantastic rollout of the bioweapon. I haven't seen fear like this since that little 9/11 job back in 01. Everyone is just absolutely terrified and willing to give up whatever rights and liberties they have left."

There is no credible evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is a bioweapon. A March 2020 study in the journal *Nature Medicine* concluded that the COVID-19 virus "is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus." According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19's similarities to other coronaviruses suggest "a likely single, recent emergence of this virus from an animal reservoir." A February 2020 study published in the journal *Nature* found that the COVID-19 virus is "96% identical at the whole-genome level to a bat coronavirus."

Volunteer moderators "perform general site maintenance," according to 4chan's FAQ page. Their duties include deleting posts that violate the site's rules, banning users, pinning threads to the top of boards, and closing threads. Moderators are selected "by invite only," according to the site, although no explanation is provided about who issues the invitations.

"Janitors," who are also volunteers, help moderators police the site. They can delete posts on specific boards and submit requests to ban users. Janitors are selected through an application process, according to the FAQ page. Regular users can report posts for violating 4chan's rules.

In 2015, 4chan announced on its blog that moderators and janitors would have to sign a volunteer agreement and provide the site with proof of their identity.

Users who have been banned can appeal the decision, sometimes after waiting for a set period of time. If a janitor submits a ban request, the user in question is blocked from posting for 15 minutes. Some users have been “disallowed from posting due to repeated abuse,” according to 4chan’s FAQ page.

In March 2019, 4chan was among a number of sites temporarily blocked by internet service providers in Australia and New Zealand for failing to remove footage of a mass shooting at two Christchurch, New Zealand, mosques that killed 50 people. The shooter’s manifesto included multiple references to memes that are popular on 4chan, such as Serbia Strong/Remove Kebab (a propaganda music video produced by Bosnian Serb Army soldiers) and Navy Seal Copypasta (a threatening message in which the writer claims to be a U.S. Navy Seal).

QAnon, a fringe, right-wing movement whose followers believe numerous conspiracy theories involving the U.S. government, began on 4chan in October 2017. A user who referred to his or herself as “Q” and claimed to be a high-level U.S. government insider posted a series of messages on the Politically Incorrect (/pol/) board, in a thread titled “Calm Before the Storm.” These messages claimed that Q had been instructed to release intel (“crumbs”) on 4chan to alert the public to a countercoup planned by U.S. President Donald Trump against the “deep state,” a network of government officials who are allegedly trying to undermine him and his administration.

Starting in August 2014, 4chan served as a main hub for the “Gamergate” controversy, a series of online harassment campaigns against women connected to the video game industry (and those who supported them).

Gamergate began when Eron Gjoni, the ex-boyfriend of independent video game developer Zoe Quinn, wrote a series of blog posts chronicling the demise of their relationship. The posts claimed that Quinn had cheated on Gjoni with Nathan Grayson, a gaming journalist who worked for the site Kotaku, among other men in the video game industry. Users on 4chan, as well as other

social networking sites such as Twitter and Reddit, began accusing Quinn of trading sex for coverage of Depression Quest, a game she had created. Quinn, Grayson, and Kotaku said the allegations were false. In an August 2014 post, Kotaku Editor-in-Chief Stephen Totilo wrote that Grayson had published only one article for the site involving Quinn (before they became romantically involved) and had never reviewed Depression Quest.

Quinn's personal information, including her home address and nude photos, were posted online and she received countless threats of rape and death, multiple news sources reported. Those who came to Quinn's defense, including feminist writer and media critic Anita Sarkeesian and game developer Brianna Wu, were also harassed. Christopher Poole, 4chan's founder and then-administrator, eventually banned all discussion of Gamergate from the site.

In an incident dubbed "Celebgate" or "The Fappening," a massive collection of hacked celebrity nude photos was released on 4chan in August 2014. The photos, which featured celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence, Kate Upton, and Kirsten Dunst, were quickly re-posted on numerous other sites. According to Rolling Stone, Poole "complied with takedown notices from Hollywood lawyers," but the photos are still accessible elsewhere online.

The hacktivist group Anonymous was formed on 4chan in the early 2000s. Its name comes from the "Anonymous" username that appears on most 4chan posts.

NewsGuard sent two emails to 4chan's press account, inquiring about the site's moderation process and its connection to numerous controversies, but did not receive a response. A phone number listed for the site's domain registrant was not operational.

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#### Transparency

4chan users can remain anonymous under the site's policies. They are able to identify themselves with a temporary username, but this is not required and the site does not offer a formal user registration process.

However, they can use a pseudo-registration system called a "tripcode," which is essentially a password that attaches the same unique string of characters to a username and can help verify a user's identity. Users can also employ what the site calls "secure tripcodes," which provide an extra layer of password security through what 4chan refers to as a "secret key file on the server." The site tracks the IP addresses from which users create posts.

Moderators can identify themselves by using what 4chan calls a "capcode." The capcode is included after the moderator's username (or an anonymous designation) and displayed in purple as "## Mod," along with 4chan's logo. 4chan's administrator can also use a special code, which is displayed in red as "## Admin," along with 4chan's logo. Mousing over the logo will bring up a message that says "This user is a 4chan Moderator" or "This user is the 4chan Administrator." Neither moderators nor the administrator are required to use capcodes when they post. Janitors (who are instructed to not reveal themselves) and regular users cannot use capcodes. If janitors identify themselves, they can be removed from the janitor program.

4chan does not provide a public list of moderators. "Since 4chan is primarily an anonymous website, the moderators abide by that same mindset," the site states on its FAQ page. Users can contact moderators (and other regular users) in 4chan's official IRC (internet relay chat) channel, but without prior knowledge of IRCs, it may be difficult to use the service. The channel includes a public chat room and the ability to send private messages to other members. Moderators are identified with an "@" or "%" symbol before their username. Users must register their username with an active email address to access 4chan's IRC channel.

The site states that "Hiroyuki Nishimura is the administrator of 4chan" on its FAQ page, but does not disclose that he is also the owner. 4chan Community Support LLC is referenced only on the site's Legal page.

NewsGuard sent two emails to 4chan's email address for press inquiries, asking about its transparency practices, but did not receive a response.

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## History

4chan was founded in 2003 by Christopher Poole (who is often referred to as "moot," his online pseudonym), when he was 15 years old and living in Westchester County, New York. Poole's identity remained unknown until 2008, when the Wall Street Journal contacted him for a story about the site. He said in a Reddit post that he based 4chan on Futaba Channel (also known as 2chan), a popular Japanese site, and originally promoted the site on Something Awful, one of the internet's oldest and largest forums.

Poole, who started working for Google in 2016, was named "World's Most Influential Person" in 2009 in Time magazine's annual Time 100 internet poll. TechCrunch reported that 4chan users hacked the poll using an auto-voting program, but Time honored the results and Poole denied knowing about such a plan.

Hiroyuki Nishimura bought 4chan in September 2015, after Poole left the site in January of that year. Poole told Rolling Stone that before Gamergate and Celebgate, he had been thinking about stepping down for about a year and did so after "probably the most stressful month of [his] life."

In 2007, before Nishimura was involved with 4chan, Wired reported that he was facing more than 50 civil lawsuits related to libel, defamation, copyright violations, and privacy. He told Wired, "If the verdict mandates deleting things, I'll do it. I just haven't complied with demands to pay money. Would a cell phone carrier feel responsible when somebody receives a threatening phone call?"

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