**Title:** Anonymity, Design, and Identification:The Rhetorical Construction of Identity on Digital Social Media

**Presenter:** Erika M. Sparby

My work analyzes how an interface’s technological design and ideology of anonymity shape what kind of cohesive digital identity its users are able to develop and perform. I will take 4chan, a popular imageboard founded in 2003, as a case study for this presentation. This examination of 4chan’s anonymous ideology, design, and use of identification to create a collective identity has implications for other digital social media sites: just as 4chan users have formed a community identity, so to have users on popular interfaces like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. This exploration of 4chan will contribute to a rhetorical theory of identity construction and performance for digital social media.

4chan’s Random, or /b/, board is best known for producing countless popular memes (for instance rickrolling and lolcats) and as the home base for the hacker group Anonymous. But I am interested in it for the ideology—a system of beliefs that drive action—and technological design—its affordances and constraints—that drive it. In particular, 4chan is shaped by an ideology of anonymity, which allows users—or anons as they prefer to be called—to express themselves freely with few real-world consequences for their words and actions. But its ideology is also reinforced and recursively shaped by the technological design. Users are paradoxically afforded such freedom of speech through the interface’s constraints: there is no central registration database and every user’s name appears automatically as “anonymous” when they post to the board. But despite—or perhaps because of—4chan’s anonymity and design, users have coalesced and formed something resembling a group identity. This enigmatic activity begs the question, how do ideology and design shape a rhetorically constructed collective identity?

The answer lies in a rhetorical analysis of 4chan’s posts that hinges on a theory of digital identification. Kenneth Burke (1950) defines the goal for identification as persuading an audience to think in a certain way or take some kind of action. However, in digital social media, identification appears to perform new and distinct tasks (Barabara Warnick and Michael S. Heineman 2012; Stephanie Vie 2014), among them allowing users to join a group of like-minded individuals with whom they share similar interests. Because everyone is designated “anonymous,” there is no way to determine with any certainty how many people are involved in a conversation or who says what, but anons still engage in identification that leads to a cohesive group identity centered around such rhetorical acts as hate speech and specialized language as well as challenging gender identities. Such actions create an insider/outsider dynamic that allows for anons to both protect their collective identity while also keeping others from easily joining it.

My study suggests that all three components—anonymity, design, and identification—are key to how users construct a group identity, both on 4chan and on other digital social media interfaces.