

## 106 Pipeline ironies

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### 107 the colonial religious history behind online hate

108 Suzanne van Geuns Suzanne van Geuns is writing a genealogy of sexual frustration on the internet. She works at Princeton's Centre for Culture, Society, and Religion.

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110 'There's really no other way to put it,' Frederick Brennan sighed when his interviewer pushed him to consider the hate spread through his website,

111 → 'than that we're a common carrier' . Brennan established 8chan in 2013, and the message board quickly became notorious for its prominent role in harassment campaigns, white nationalist mass murders, and anti-democratic conspiracy movements. Speaking with *Ars Technica*, he explained that he saw 8chan as a 'pipeline' for content and rushed to underline that only 'some bad people' among its many users used this pipeline for hate. When Brennan refused to plug it, however, even after multiple violent events directly associated with 8chan, infrastructure corporations intervened. They refused the website hosting services or website protection, cutting access to their infrastructural pipelines to stop the flow of hate through 8chan .

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This concerted effort to 'clog' should not trick us into thinking that justice is a pipeline matter, however. Cloudflare, a company that removed 8chan from its client base, explained its decision

in language that is ironically similar to Brennan's. Cloudflare provides 'mere conduits' for content, and hastened to underline that its specialised Content Delivery Networks principally service the 'huge portion of the Internet' that is not dedicated to hate 📱. It is as though to invoke pipelines is to reduce the politics of hate to a yes/no question about flow and blockage.

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The strange case of 8chan is also a chance to probe deeper, however. An American political menace, 8chan was powered from the Philippines and paid for with Japanese money. How did this come to be?

## THE PHILIPPINES

'Hold on a sec,' Brennan tells his interviewer, 'I think we missed a few calls from PLBC.' He was discussing his average workday (coding, trying to stop spam) running 8chan 📱. PLBC is a mishearing. Brennan almost certainly said PLDT, short for Philippine Long Distance Telephone company. He was calling from the Philippines, where he moved to join his then-business partner Jim Watkins. Manila was affordable and pleasant, Watkins had promised, and the work of running a message board could be done from anywhere. The pipelines that connect computers to servers span the globe. Still, it is no coincidence that the duo ended up in the Philippines.




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PLDT's physical infrastructure was born of imperialist ambition. Its establishment was shepherded by American statesman Henry Stimson, who was then working as Governor-General of the Philippines 📱. He was committed

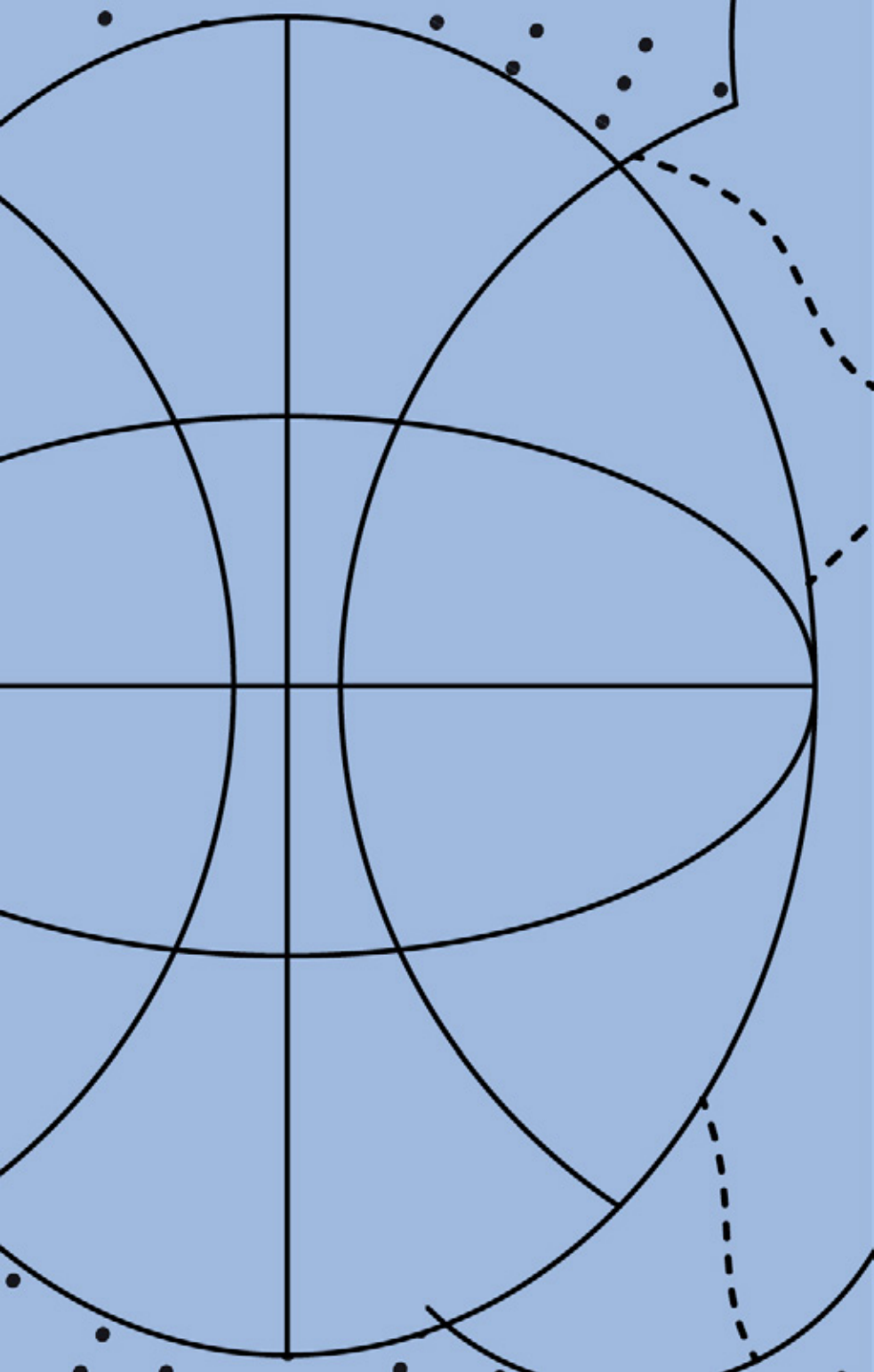
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- 116 → to a version of colonialism that presented itself not as extraction but as benevolent ‘tutelage’ . Drawing on a ubiquitous form of Christian racism, in which Filipino people were understood to be in an earlier stage of evolutionary and religious development than white American Christians, Stimson and his peers set out to ‘uplift’ the Philippines and ‘prepare’ its inhabitants for self-
- 117 → governance . They expected to facilitate this uplift in part through the ‘material development’ of
- 118 → Philippine infrastructure .


- Colonial infrastructure was a capitalist enterprise. US colonialists believed trade would mould the Filipino into the ‘right kind of self-possessed individual,’ a subject whose fitness for self-
- 119 → governance is indexed by her ability and desire to consume American products . Communications infrastructure, which presented opportunities for advertising *and* for Christian missions, seemed especially essential for setting people in the
- 120 → Philippines on the American path . Once the right pipelines were in place, men like Stimson reasoned, the right kind of civilisation would soon develop at the other end. Their ideological commitment to infrastructure, as part of the slow realisation of imperial and capitalist politics, still undergirds physical internet infrastructures today.


- PLDT is a case in point. In the early twentieth century, when the United States first gained control over the Philippines, there was a rush to ensure that the ocean cables required for telephone conversations would be laid by *American*
- 121 → businesses . The undersea cables supporting the Web still follow these routes today, and as a result, the Philippines is particularly well-positioned





- 122 → in this submarine network . PLDT, the company in which these initial American infrastructural investments would culminate, enjoyed a long monopoly as an internet service provider . It still
- 123 → offers the lowest latency in the region  PLDT
- 124 → would have been the obvious choice for high-volume users such as Brennan, the practical and seemingly neutral usefulness of its 'mere conduits' inseparable from colonial ideologies.

### THE FLOW OF PROFIT

- 125 → While the pipelines between Asia and the United States may have been built to facilitate 'progress' toward white Christian superiority, their immediate function was always to facilitate the flow of capital. When Brennan flew to Manila, gladly accepting his offer of an apartment and infrastructural services, he joined an experienced exploiter of such flows. Watkins is a US Army veteran turned internet entrepreneur. His profit model was to host content in the United States—through a server farm in San Francisco, to be precise—that would be censored in the regions where it is most popular . He hosted porn. N.T. Technology, Watkins's main business venture, used US-based servers to turn a lack of constraints around speech, an archetypal feature of the American legal landscape, into an opportunity for financial gain.

- 126 → Keeping 8chan running, it turned out, required exactly this form of global exchange. In the late 1990s, N.T. Technology began hosting Japanese porn with the genitals unblurred. In the early 2000s, the company expanded to host the popular and controversial Japanese discussion board 2chan . The board was profitable. In

2008, its owner boasted a million dollars a year in advertising revenue . When asked whether he, as owner, should be held responsible for the harassment campaigns spawned on 2chan, he spoke of pipelines—would a cell phone carrier be responsible for every threatening phone call?—and confidently asserted that he was not afraid of crackdowns from the Japanese government, because 2chan was hosted in the United States. This confidence came at a steep price: Watkins claimed 60% of all 2chan's advertising proceeds .

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Without this money, extracted from the intersection between Asian demand and American legal and material infrastructures, 8chan could not have

acquired its cultural prominence.

Almost from the start, 8chan—  
anarchic, unmoderated—  
was popular enough  
to need serious  
infrastructural  
support,  
but too  
offensive  
to monetise



. Watkins's  
solution was  
simple: 8chan

may have repelled  
advertisers, but 2chan

did not. He used the latter  
to fund the former, perhaps in

anticipation of 8chan eventually  
becoming as profitable as 2chan.

Brennan's move to Manila interlaced  
the colonial pipelines that connect the

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Philippines to the United States with the financial pipelines through which Watkins funnelled money from a profitable Asian messaging board to its not-yet-profitable American counterpart.

## MAKING THE MOST OF IRONY

The story of 8chan is full of ironies, moments of ideological inconsistency and narrative instability. Consider the profitable export of American versions of freedom—whether the pleasures of consumption or those of porn—to racialised others in Asia, while American versions of hate are funded by the advertising proceeds associated with Asian media consumption. Or take infrastructures that were built from claims to moral and religious superiority, only to be re-used by men who actively dismiss moral questions by calling their work infrastructural and therefore beyond scrutiny.

Too often, debates about online hate smooth over such ironies as distractions from the all-important decision to plug or reroute a particular pipeline. But this is a missed opportunity for resistance; irony provides a foothold for a critique that is deeper than deplatforming. If we want different futures, we must uncover the submerged pipelines that tether today's cruelty to the colonial past—so that we can blow them up.

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