

4chan Sold: Can Web Forums Be Profitable?

By Joyce Li, J.D. Candidate 2018 | October 1, 2015

Last week, Christopher Poole, founder of the anonymous image-based web forum [4chan](#), [sold](#) the site to [Hiroyuki Nishimura](#), founder of earlier anonymous forum 2channel. Neither Poole nor Nishimura commented on the terms of the acquisition, but the sale comes at a time of [growing venture capital investment](#) in traffic heavy websites such as 4chan and [Reddit](#).

4chan holds only a fraction of Reddit's nearly five million [daily page views](#), however it is not yet clear whether either site can utilize its traffic to produce scalable ad revenue. The growth of sites such as Reddit is attributable in large part to the [freedom](#) they afford their users, but the selfsame hands-off policies that have fueled their popularity are often in direct [conflict](#) with monetization strategies.

In contrast, BuzzFeed, another popular viral news site, has built up its users mostly upon staff published articles. The articles are designed for maximum sharability (the latest in [adorable animals](#) or [celebrity gossip](#)), while occasionally broaching "[serious news](#)." BuzzFeed publishes [exclusively authored work](#), which in addition to its [collaboration](#) with the New York Times lends the site a flavor of respectability not seen on Reddit. As a result, BuzzFeed is able to attract advertisers while still maintaining its user base, allowing the company to [monetize](#) in a way that Reddit has not been able to achieve.

The question is then whether web forums like 4chan and Reddit are capable of monetizing at all, or whether their traffic volume is inextricably linked to a lack of ads. Reddit has yet to come to an answer, but is struggling with the [strong tension](#) between preserving user freedoms, keeping forums [appropriate enough](#) to attract advertisers, and finding users willing to stay despite the ads.

In the world of viral Internet news, BuzzFeed is Whole Foods and 4chan is the corner co-op. Venture capitalists are pushing co-ops to grow, but it may turn out that a grown-up co-op is just another Whole Foods.