

# What is Discord, the chatting app tied to classified leaks?

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A display Discord stands at the company's booth at the Game Developers Conference 2023 in San Francisco on March 22, 2023. A major leak of classified U.S. documents that's shaken Washington and exposed new details of its intelligence gathering may have started in a chatroom on the social media platform popular with gamers. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File

The chatting app Discord, which is one of the most popular ways gamers communicate online, finds itself at the center of an investigation into the leak of classified documents about the war in Ukraine.

The investigation is unfolding as Discord makes an ambitious push to recruit more [users](#) and expand the way they use the versatile app.

Discord said it is cooperating with [law enforcement](#) in the investigation of the leak, which is believed to have started on the site. A Massachusetts Air National Guard member reportedly posted on Discord for years about guns, games, favorite memes and, according to some who chatted with him, closely guarded U.S. secrets.

## WHAT IS DISCORD?

Discord started in 2015 as a nerdy online hangout for gamers and had some hiccups in its quest for mainstream success. Its growth accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic as a forum for its mostly younger users to gossip or even help each other with homework.

"Every month, more than 150 million people come to Discord to hang out with family, friends and communities," its co-founder and CEO, Jason Citron, said last month at a press event. "It's become a place where they have fun and get things done together."

Discord users skew young—about 38% of its web users and nearly half of its Android app users are between the ages of 18 and 24, according to digital intelligence platform Similarweb. They are roughly 75% male, the research group says.

Recently, the app has also pitched itself as a [gateway to artificial intelligence tools](#) such as Midjourney, which conjures up new imagery based on commands it's given in a Discord chat.

Discord announced in January that it was buying another teen-focused social app called Gas, which enables people to share online polls and uplifting compliments.

The purchase was part of a larger push to target communities beyond gaming, according to Insider Intelligence analyst Jeremy Goldman. Goldman said Discord has also benefited from the turmoil surrounding Elon Musk's Twitter takeover as a "not-insignificant number" of gamers put Discord handles on their Twitter profiles to show they were decamping.

## **HOW DOES IT WORK?**

Discord can be accessed through desktops, smartphones or gaming consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation. It allows users to create invite-only "servers."

The servers, which resemble the professional messaging platform Slack, allow users to create subchannels where they can communicate over text, voice or video chats.

Some users might have "friend servers" of several dozen people they know in real life, while others might join larger servers devoted to an online community of people interested in a specific topic.

The company hosts nearly 21,000 servers, the vast majority of which are dedicated to gaming. Others are focused on topics like generative AI, entertainment or music.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE LEAKED DOCUMENTS?**

The Massachusetts Air National Guard member was identified as Jack

Teixeira, 21, who was arrested Thursday in connection with the disclosure of highly classified military documents about the Ukraine war and other top national security issues. The breach has raised questions about America's ability to safeguard its most sensitive secrets.

Some of the leaks are believed to have started on Discord. A chat group called "Thug Shaker Central" drew roughly two dozen enthusiasts who talked about their favorite guns and shared memes and jokes, some of them racist. The group also included a running discussion on wars that included talk of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In that discussion, one user known as "the O.G." would for months post material that he said was classified.

#### HAS DISCORD BEEN INVOLVED WITH ANY OTHER INVESTIGATIONS?

The white gunman who killed 10 Black shoppers and workers last year at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, shared detailed plans for the attack with a small group of people on Discord about half an hour beforehand.

The diary, kept on a private, invite-only server, included months of racist, antisemitic entries along with step-by-step descriptions of the shooter's assault plans, a detailed account of a reconnaissance trip he made, and hand-drawn maps of the store. He livestreamed the attack on a different platform, Twitch.

Discord said 15 users clicked on the invitation and would have had access to his entries before the attack. There was no evidence anyone saw them before then.

Discord said it removed the diary and banned the shooter's account as soon as it became aware of them. The company said it also took steps to

prevent content related to the attack from spreading.

Since 2020, Discord has been part of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, a group co-founded by [tech companies](#) such as Microsoft, Facebook and YouTube that works to tamp down the spread of mass shooting videos livestreamed by their perpetrators.

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