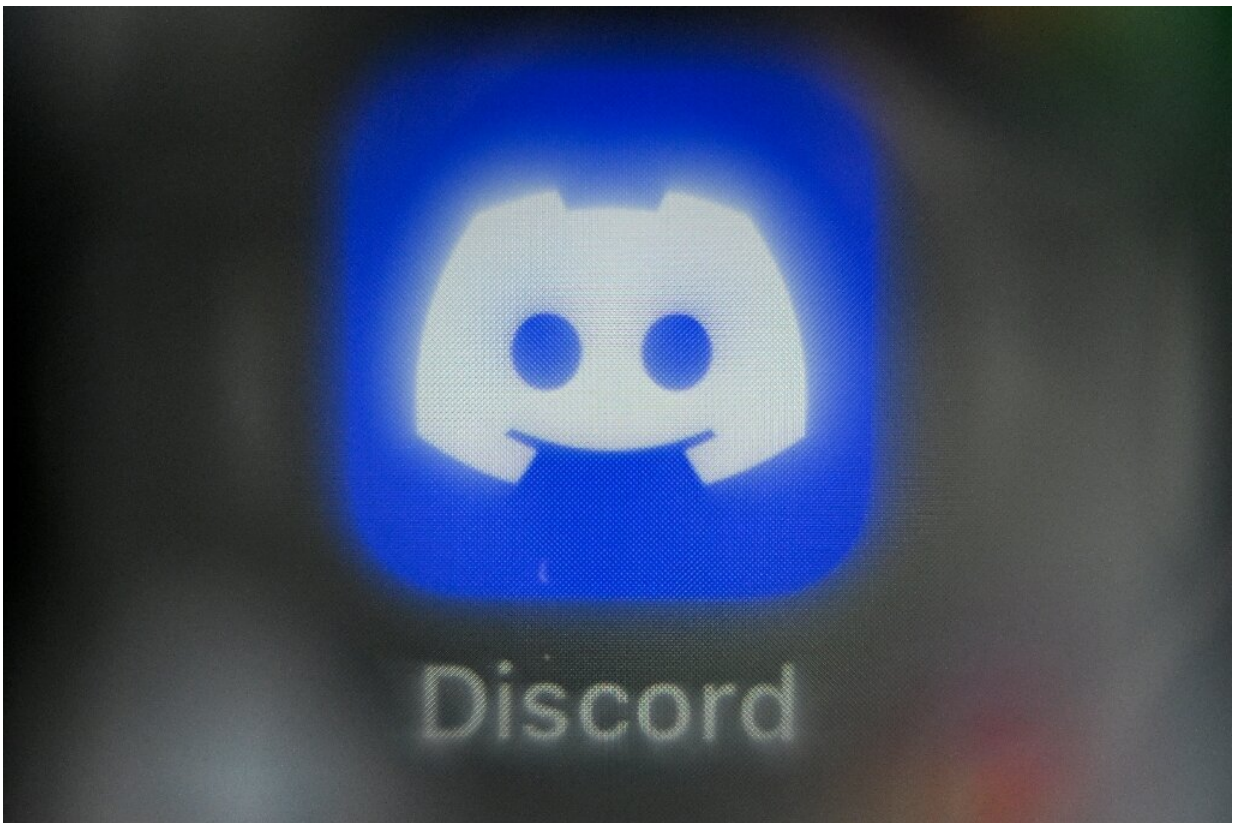


# Discord, a prime ground for online 'rebels'... and leaks?

April 13 2023, by Glenn CHAPMAN

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Forums at gamer-centric Discord social network appear to have the appeal of authenticity that appears to have been lost by social media firms like Twitter.

It is perhaps no accident that a trove of sensitive US documents reportedly ended up in a chat room on Discord, one of a small group of

platforms that are widely seen by experts as natural haunts for online renegades.

While the authenticity of the material has yet to be confirmed by officials, The Washington Post reported the embarrassing leak of secrets about the war in Ukraine came from a Discord user nicknamed "OG", a gun enthusiast who works on a US military base.

The New York Times said a "trail of digital evidence" led to a 21-year-old national guardsman named Jack Teixeira as the leader of the private chat group, called Thug Shaker Central. He has not been officially identified as a suspect.

San Francisco-based Discord was created in 2015 primarily as a platform for gamers to chat, but it has also become an alternative for users disenchanted with major players Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

Discord allows communities to set up something called servers, which are virtual spaces where users can chat, share media, and connect with other users who share similar interests.

Citing fellow members of the group, the Post reported that the [chat room](#) allegedly behind the leak was a destination for two dozen men and boys who shared a "mutual love of guns, military gear and God."

"There are a million microcosms out there in social media land that are like that," said Syracuse University research professor Jason Davis.

"Echo chambers, I call them, and Discord is pretty famous for them."

## **'Dark pockets'**

Similar loosely run forums exist at Reddit and Mastodon, most of which

involve benign topics like hobbies or games, but always with a tinge of freedom from censors that some believe hold too much sway over Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat.

"Dark pockets exist," Davis said. "Discord, the name tells you what you need to know."

"It's a place for rebels and nerds (who) embrace that kind of anti-mainstream sentiment."

Discord has already landed in hot water for playing a role in a 2017 right-wing rally in Charlottesville, Virginia which erupted in violence and left one person dead.

The FBI found Discord chats where a white supremacist leader seemed to encourage violence at the event, and Discord said afterward that it banned servers promoting neo-Nazi ideology.

Discord has also been accused of being used to share child pornography and by predators to communicate with minors.

The attraction of Discord or Mastodon are that they are "distributed," meaning no central entity has complete control over them, said Cyber Threat Alliance chief executive Michael Daniel.

There is no one in charge of checking user identity, making the forums ideal for those want to release information onto the internet anonymously, according to Daniel.

A Discord spokesperson told AFP that user safety is a priority, and that content violating its policies can result in people being banned, servers being shut down, and police alerted.

"In regards to the apparent breach of classified material, we are cooperating with [law enforcement](#)," a Discord spokesperson said.

"As this remains an active investigation, we cannot provide further comment at this time."

## **Authentic appeal**

It makes sense that hackers, cyber security professionals, and other technically-savvy people would feel at home in gamer forums, according to Davis.

Military personnel fond of online shooter games are also likely to take part in chat forums, Davis reasoned.

"If you look at most leaks, they really are actually personnel leaks and not cyber security leaks where somebody hacked into the system," Davis said, before the release of the report by the Washington Post.

"So, could this be a 20-something year-old somehow in the military? Of course."

Time will tell, he noted, since if Pentagon documents were hacked from the outside there will be "forensic footprints" that the US is doggedly tracking, Davis said.

"It is highly unlikely this was the result of some teenager that just happened to figure out a way to get access to this information," CTA chief Daniel said of the leak.

"That is just not how things happen."

Davis said that the likes of Discord and Reddit would see continued

success.

"People seem to be always be seeking that organic authenticity of a group that really 'gets them'," Davis told AFP.

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