

**HACKER, HOAXER,
WHISTLEBLOWER, SPY**

**THE MANY FACES
OF ANONYMOUS**



GABRIELLA COLEMAN

"Essential reading" —Glenn Greenwald

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Introduction: “And Now, You Have Got Our Attention”

On July 29, 2007, an entity calling itself Anonymous—unknown, at the time, to all except the most erudite Internet denizens—uploaded a video to YouTube. A metallic, digital tone thrums as a headless suited man appears over a blank background. A male voice begins to speak through the interference: “Dear Fox News,” it intones.¹ The news organization had recently devoted a segment entirely to a group they described as “the Internet Hate Machine”—a title the collective would subsequently adopt as a badge of honor.

But for a collective that revels in trickery and guile, to simply laugh and dismiss such an exposé would be to miss a great opportunity. And so, the disturbingly ponderous, down-pitched voice of Anonymous continues: “The name and nature of Anonymous has been ravaged, as if it were a whore in a back alley, and then placed on display for the public eye to behold. Allow me to say quite simply: you completely missed the point of who and what we are ... We are everyone and we are no one ... We are the face of chaos and the harbingers of judgment. We laugh at the face of tragedy. We mock those in pain. We ruin the lives of others simply because we can ... A man takes out his aggression on a cat, we laugh. Hundreds die in a plane crash, we laugh. We are the embodiment of

humanity with no remorse, no caring, no love, and no sense of morality.”

The video ends, “YOU ... HAVE NOW GOT ... OUR ATTENTION.”

They certainly got mine—soon after the video’s publication, I became entangled in a multi-year research project on the collective that I have only now just twisted my way out of (this book monumentalizes that struggle). The video was meant to satirize Fox News’s hyperbolic characterization of Anonymous as the ultimate purveyors of Internet pranking and trolling, “hackers on steroids,” as Fox had called them. And yet, the creepy sentiments and chilling style captured the trolls’ terrifying side perfectly; instead of overturning Fox News’s ridiculously one-dimensional portrayal, the video seemingly confirmed it to the utmost—though only, of course, to those not in on the joke.

This double meaning captures the dark humor of Anonymous (the lulz, they call it) in a nutshell. The lulz—a deviant style of humor and a quasi-mystical state of being—has, as we will see, evolved with Anonymous from the beginning. And there was a time when spreading lulzy mayhem was all Anonymous seemed interested in. But not long after this parodic and bombastic video, Anons could be found at the heart of hundreds of political “ops”—becoming integral, even, to some of the most compelling political struggles of our age. In solidarity with Tunisian protesters, Anonymous hacked the Tunisian government’s websites in January 2011; months later, Spain’s *indignados* beamed the collective’s signature Guy Fawkes mask onto a building in the Puerta del Sol; and Anons disseminated some of the first calls to occupy Wall Street.

By then the collective had established itself as a social, political force with a series of ops that remain some of its most memorable. In 2008, adherents to a new vision for Anonymous took Scientology to task after the litigious organization attempted to censor a famous video of Tom Cruise. Germinated for the sake of the lulz, Anons both realized

their power to impact global struggles and the pleasure such engagements could provide. Anonymous became even more widely known two years later in December 2010, the result of “Operation Avenge Assange.” Initiated by AnonOps, one of the collective’s more militant and prolific nodes, Anons engaged in digital direct action by launching a distributed denial of service (DDoS) campaign. This tactic, which disrupts access to webpages by flooding them with tidal waves of requests, was directed against financial institutions that had refused to process donations to WikiLeaks, including PayPal and MasterCard. With each operation Anonymous was further emboldened.

And yet, even after Anonymous drifted away from ungovernable trolling pandemonium to engage in the global political sphere, whenever people scrutinized its activist interventions—whether in a street protest or a high-profile computer intrusion—a question always seemed to loom: are Anonymous and its adherents principled dissidents? Or are they simply kids screwing around on the Internet as lulz-drunk trolls?

This confusion is eminently understandable. Beyond a foundational commitment to the maintenance of anonymity and a broad dedication to the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program. While increasingly recognized for its digital dissent and direct action, Anonymous has never displayed a predictable trajectory. Given that Anonymous’s ancestry lies in the sometimes humorous, frequently offensive, and at times deeply invasive world of Internet trolling—the core logic of which seems, at least at first glance, to be inhospitable to the cultivation of activist sensibilities and politicized endeavors—it is remarkable that the name Anonymous became a banner seized by political activists in the first place.

From Trolling to the Misfits of Activism

Today the broad deployment of both Anonymous's Guy Fawkes mask and the ideas it came to stand for among demonstrators occupying Tahrir Square and Polish politicians sitting in parliamentary chambers seem absurd when we consider the collective's origins. Before 2008, the moniker Anonymous was used almost exclusively for what one Anon describes as "Internet motherfuckery." Anonymous, birthed in the pits of 4chan's random bulletin board /b/ (often regarded as the "asshole of the Internet"), was a name synonymous with trolling: an activity that seeks to ruin the reputations of individuals and organizations and reveal embarrassing and personal information. Trolls try to upset people by spreading grisly or disturbing content, igniting arguments, or engendering general bedlam. The chaos of feuding and flaming can be catalyzed by inhabiting identities, beliefs, and values solely for their mischievous potential; by invading online forums with spam; or by ordering hundreds of pizzas, taxis, and even SWAT teams to a target's residence. Whatever the technique, trolls like to say they do what they do for the lulz—a spirited but often malevolent brand of humor etymologically derived from lol.

One early Anonymous trolling raid—legendary to this day—set its sights on a virtual platform, called Habbo Hotel, whose tag line enthusiastically beckons, "Make friends, join the fun, get noticed!" A Finnish environment geared toward teenagers, it encourages visitors to create cutesy, Lego-style avatars who can socialize together in the hotel and customize guest rooms with "furni." On July 6, 2006, Anonymous logged onto the site in droves—presenting themselves, all, as black men in gray suits with prominent afros. By navigating just so, they were able to collectively assemble into human swastikas and picket lines, both of which prevented regular Habbo members (children, mostly) from entering the hotel's pool. Anyone attempting to understand the reasons for these

actions was informed by the mustachioed characters that the pool was closed “due to fail and AIDS.”

A couple of year’s after the first Habbo Raids, and a mere six months after they had been labeled the “Internet Hate Machine,” certain Anons began using the name and some associated iconography—headless men in black suits, in particular—to coordinate political protests. This surprising metamorphosis sprouted from what many consider to be one of Anonymous’s most legendary trolling provocations: targeting the Church of Scientology. “In a previously unseen way,” noted one participant in the raids, “the greater Anon community united to unleash a hearty load of *fuck you* upon Scientology’s entire cult empire.”² Impelled by the lulz—by the desire to release an avalanche of hilarious and terrifying mischief—thousands boarded the troll train, christened “Project Chanology,” to launch DDoS attacks on Scientology websites, order unpaid pizzas and escorts to Scientology churches across North America, fax images of nude body parts to churches, and propel a barrage of phone pranks, most notably against the Dianetics hotlines designed to offer advice regarding the “first truly workable technology of the mind.”

Like most previous raids, many expected this hearty “fuck you” would run its course and then peter out after a few days of brutal and playful shenanigans. But a short video made by a small group of participants—concocted for the lulz alone—ignited a serious debate within the rank and file of Anonymous. The video “declared war” on the Church: “For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind—and for our own enjoyment—we shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.”³ This ironic declaration of war spurred individuals into debate and then catapulted them onto the streets. On February 10, 2008, over seven thousand people in 127 cities protested the Church of Scientology’s human rights abuses and acts of censorship.

Anonymous thus shifted from (as one participating Anon

later explained to my class) “ultracoordinated motherfuckery” to the dissemination of incriminating facts about Scientology. They also forged bonds with an older generation of dissidents already at work highlighting the Church’s abuses. Trolling had given way to an earnest activist endeavor, as if Anonymous had emerged from its online sanctuary and set out to improve the world. Over the next two years, some Anonymous members would hatch unrelated activist subgroups, and many participants came to identify themselves as bona fide activists, albeit with a transgressive twist.

Many of Anonymous’s actions, like creating the publicity videos that have become a vernacular institution unto themselves, are entirely legal. But a subset of tactics—notably DDoS attacks and hacks—are illegal: criminal offenses under all circumstances, at least in the United States. Government officials have thus made various attempts to slot a class of its activities under the umbrella term of “cyberwarfare,” and prosecute its participants accordingly. The epitome of this maneuver occurred on February 21, 2012, when the *Wall Street Journal* reported that General Keith Alexander, then director of the United States National Security Agency (NSA), had briefed officials at the White House in secret meetings. He claimed Anonymous “could have the ability within the next year or two to bring about a limited power outage through a cyberattack.”⁴

As the *Wall Street Journal* article ricocheted across social media platforms, questions were raised. Did this claim strike anyone as believable? Just what exactly constituted the “ability” to bring about a power outage? What would be an appropriate response if this were true? It is unlikely that we will ever find out whether the NSA’s assessment was based on credible intelligence or whether it was meant simply to smear and discredit Anonymous. Either way, General Alexander’s claim succeeded, at least momentarily, in portraying Anonymous as a menace akin to Islamic jihadists and the communist threat of yesteryear.

Ultimately, it proved unconvincing. Anonymous, for all its varied tactics—both legal and illegal, online and offline—has never been known to publicly call for such an attack. And there is no evidence to suggest that it would so much as entertain the idea. Endangering human lives has never been a topic of discussion among members, even during the most helter-skelter of chat room and message board conversations. Subsequent news reports quoted activists and security experts who dismissed the NSA's claims as “fear-mongering.”⁵

Even though a tactic like this would be entirely out of character for Anonymous, the group's relationship with the court of public opinion remains ambivalent. Anonymous's methods are at times subversive, often rancorous, usually unpredictable, and frequently disdainful of etiquette or the law. Take “doxing”: the leaking of private information—such as Social Security numbers, home addresses, or personal photos—resides in a legal gray zone because some of the information released can be found on publicly accessible websites.

A single Anonymous operation might integrate all three modes—legal, illegal, and legally gray tactics—and if there is an opportunity to infuse an operation with the lulz as well, someone will. A prime example is Operation BART from August 2011. Anonymous was spurred into action when San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) officials sought to disable mobile phone reception on station platforms to thwart a planned anti-police brutality march. Local activists had called for the demonstration to protest the fatal shooting of Charles Hill, an unarmed passenger. Incensed by transportation authorities' meddling in democratic expression, Anonymous helped organize a series of street demonstrations soon after.

A couple of individuals hacked into BART's computers and released customer data in order to garner media attention. Someone also found a racy, semi-nude photo of BART's official spokesperson, Linton Johnson, on his personal website. The photo was republished on the “bartlulz” website along

with this brazen rationalization: “if you are going to be a dick to the public, then I’m sure you don’t mind showing your dick to the public.” Sometimes coy and playful, sometimes serious and inspiring, often all at once (as OpBART demonstrated so well), even to this day, these activist tricksters are still animated by a collective will toward mischief—toward the lulz.

“I did it for the lulz”

Does Anonymous’s ongoing embrace of lulzy mischief mean that researching them was a merry and lighthearted affair, the essence of an anthropological joyride? Looking for insights into Anonymous’s surprising metamorphosis from trolling misfits to the misfits of activism, I began an anthropological study of the group in 2008. At first my research was low key, straightforward, and lighthearted. I attended protests and followed discussions on web forums and on Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—one of the most important communication applications for Anonymous (and many other geeks and hackers).

In 2011, as Anonymous grew more tentacles and activists initiated dozens of political operations, this side project became my life. For over two years I was constantly jacked in, online for a minimum of five hours a day, struggling to keep abreast of all the simultaneous operations, some of them hidden from my view due to their clandestine nature. Researching Anonymous felt like following a thread through a dark and twisty path strewn with rumors, lies, secrets, and the ghoulish reality of spies and informants. The journey has been marked by soaring thrills, disappointing dead ends, and moral pretzels—wherein seemingly intractable ethical conundrums coexist easily with clear-cut examples of inspirational risk and sacrifice. Beyond the consequences of its actions, Anonymous’s organizational structure itself felt similarly convoluted and bewildering. Over time, it became clear: Anonymous was not

simply a maze, with a structure and escape route revealed in a view from above; Anonymous was a far more complicated and tangled warren. This was no static labyrinth, like the one built by Daedalus to house the Minotaur. It was an infinite machine operating a tight recursive loop wherein mazes generated maze-generating mazes.

In spite of the difficulties I faced when traversing this maze, I gradually became acquainted with Anonymous, and it with me, sometimes on a personal level. As an anthropologist does, I watched, listened, interviewed, debated, questioned, and prodded. At times I even participated, so long as my involvement was legal. My tasks were many: editing manifestos, teaching reporters how to find Anonymous, and correcting misinformation.

My level of engagement was limited by self-imposed and external barriers. The anthropological imperative requires a certain degree of distance, while at the same time compelling one to delve deep. The trick is to integrate and go beyond simply relying on participants' explanations of events. I was sympathetic to many of Anonymous's tactics and causes, but not all of them. Moral quandaries of various sorts created critical distance. Due to the illegal nature of some activities, certain areas were off limits. This was better for Anonymous, and for me. Later, after arrests and convictions, I was able to learn retrospectively about hidden acts.

With the ascendancy of militant tactics among a new group of Anons, the stakes had changed by the summer of 2011. Anonymous began targeting Fortune 500 corporations and military defense contractors. Mercenary hackers doxed Anons, revealing their identities to law enforcement by publishing their legal names, personal photos, and addresses. Anons started to leak sensitive, classified, or humiliating information. At this juncture, the FBI got involved. And no matter how much Anonymous injected lulz into an op, humor could not stop the spread of a gut-wrenching unease among participants and observers of the group. So even if researching Anonymous

was often a thrill, and certainly always an adventure, it ultimately made me paranoid.

This was a deep paranoia that hovered over everything like a barometric disturbance before a tornado. It felt justified, but that might be just the paranoia talking. While researching Anonymous, it was imperative that I keep law enforcement away from me, and from my data. Crossing a border meant days of preparation to secure my notes and put together a safe travel computer. Questioning by authorities always felt imminent; it wasn't a question of *if* the G-men would visit, but *when*. Vigilance was necessary to protect my sources. I reminded Anonymous participants that they needed to be careful what they told me. I never sat in on their private channels as they were planning illegal operations.

As for the government, I was hiding in plain sight. By no means was I anonymous. That was the irony: I gave talks about Anonymous, I was interviewed by over 150 reporters, and I routinely discussed Anonymous on radio and television. As a scholar teaching at a prominent university, I was easy to find. On occasion, high-level corporate executives from some of the world's most powerful companies even reached out, calling me personally in the hope that I could offer some nugget of insight about an entity many of them had grown to fear.

A recurring nightmare haunted me for years. Intelligence agents hammered on my door. I would jolt upright in bed, my heart pounding: "They're here." It was just like *Poltergeist*, except the bed wasn't shaking and the demonic possession left as soon as I sat up.

One day in 2012, I washed away the remaining threads of my turbulent slumber with a strong cup of coffee, putting the nightmare in the background for another day. With my brain fully booted, I realized that today, April 19, the roles would be reversed: today I would be knocking on the doors of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Canadian

equivalent of the CIA. With a mixture of trepidation, ambivalence, and especially curiosity, I had accepted CSIS's invitation to give a lecture about Anonymous. I went to discover what CSIS thought about Anonymous—did they view them as a terrorist threat, a band of rambunctious/rabid activists, or something else entirely? My secret agenda was to test their reaction to the lulz: could an agency that manages matters of national security bring itself to see the humor in Anonymous? To find out, I concocted a simple lulz litmus test.

CSIS is headquartered in the outskirts of Canada's capital, Ottawa, in a large anodyne cream-colored building with teal accents. I arrived alone by taxi, awash in thoughts of Orwell, *Brazil*, Huxley, Kafka, and Bush/Obama's total surveillance. I asked myself, *What am I doing here? What lies in the shadows behind the walls of Canada's spy agency? Could it be as bad as I am imagining? Do they have high-tech surveillance rooms like in Minority Report? Do they conduct psychological experiments in sterile, steel-lined interrogation rooms?*

Adjusting my ill-fitting business suit, I forced myself to think that inside were boring office cubicles with people pushing paper and scheduling meetings destined for drab conference rooms with a speaker phones in the middle of their tables. Maybe there was a passive aggressive note taped to the refrigerator in the break room because someone ate all of the Tim Horton's sugary Timbits that were for the going-away party later that day. A water-stained note over the sink with the words, *Your mother doesn't work here, you will have to clean up after yourself!* It will be fine, I told myself.

To minimize my angst, I had promised myself I would offer nothing new or secret, sticking to what was already public and donating my modest honorarium to a civil liberties organization. But despite having given this same lecture dozens of times, I walked through the front door feeling more diminutive than my five-foot self. A woman with a suit greeted me. Everything felt unremarkable; there was nothing ominous in sight, just bland office plants.

I was brought to a room with a small stage. The atmosphere was tense. I couldn't discern the expression on anyone's face. I was nearly paralyzed with dread. Then, I worried that my nervousness was going to make me say something I shouldn't. These agents, after all, were exceedingly well trained in the art of information extraction; they would take advantage of any weakness or opportunity to gain an advantage. With over forty people staring at me, the atmosphere of seriousness felt like it was burning right through my suit. Nevertheless, I'd done this so many times that I was on autopilot, and it wasn't until ten minutes into my talk that I noticed my hands shaking slightly as I attempted to click the play button on my computer, in order to fire up my lulz litmus test: the famous viral video made by Anonymous that had ignited their revolutionary spirit. Every single time I had shown this clip in the past, three sentences in particular had without fail provoked laughter. Would CSIS employees lol at the lulz? In the video, as clouds move quickly over a large, indistinct, glass corporate building, a dramatic voice intones:

Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind and for our own enjoyment. We shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.

The room erupted in laughter. Mission accomplished; there was no better proof of the infectious spirit of the lulz than this moment. Intelligence agents were laughing at the lulzy video made by Anonymous trolls that gave birth to the "threat" they were tasked with assessing. *I will get out of here alive after all*, I silently sighed.

After my lecture, a smaller group of us relocated to a cramped and dingy conference room with no windows to eat bland sandwiches and cookies under the glare of fluorescent lights. I secretly wondered if there was a nicer conference room

with skylights reserved for the political scientists or economists and other more highly esteemed guests. We sat down in the office chairs and went around the room introducing ourselves. I was still too out of sorts to remember particular roles or titles, much less names. I was certainly not taking notes or secretly recording the conversation. I suspect they were. For all I knew, I could be talking to janitors, or to employees with the highest level of security clearance. One title did stick out, though—that of the other anthropologist in the room. When introduced, he nodded and smiled at me. I, meanwhile, tried hard to keep my poker face intact. All sorts of questions sprung to mind: *Is he actually trained as an anthropologist? Where did he go to school? Who was his PhD advisor? When and why did he decide to work for the CSIS? Do they pay better than academia?* But I kept my queries to myself. I was worried he would misconstrue my curiosity as interest in working for CSIS, and I wanted to avoid any recruitment overtures.

During the course of what at first felt like a meandering conversation, it eventually became apparent why I had been invited. They wanted to know one thing: whether I thought Anonymous had set their sights on taking down the power grid. The timing was not accidental. Just a month earlier, the NSA had stated that Anonymous was an imminent threat to national security, and I suppose Canada was feeling a bit of international pressure to monitor the shadowy group.

I answered honestly. For all its legal and illegal tactics to date, I explained, Anonymous had never publicly called for such an attack. There was no evidence at the time to suggest that the group would so much as consider doing such a thing. I did not feel like I was divulging anything secret, as I had commented to the press about this very subject. In fact, I felt like I was doing Anonymous a favor.

Of course, as a busy professor I could not spend all of my time on the many channels of the various IRC networks, much less monitor every single chat room where such a conversation could take place. There were also private conversations

and invite-only channels I never actually entered. “Their sociology is labyrinthine,” I explained with deliberation, likely exhibiting my own frustrations with navigating and researching Anonymous. I had probably spent more hours staring at my computer and chatting with Anonymous participants than any non-Anon, with the possible exception of informants, who were forced to be online nearly full-time. I explained that I had never seen even a hint of such a plan. Indeed, every radical action, even the doxing of belligerent police officers, provoked contentious debate about its moral appropriateness. “While Anonymous is often duplicitous and devilishly confusing,” I explained, “Anons are certainly not seeking to kill anyone. They organize at home, possibly in their underwear, typing away madly at the computer. The only ‘violence’ some participants engage in is likely of the virtual type, during their *World of Warcraft* video game battles that some percentage of them surely must play.” To hammer my point home, I offered a bit of humor, paraphrasing one Anon who had cracked the following joke soon after the NSA claimed that Anonymous was indeed capable of targeting the grid: “That’s right, we’re definitely taking down the power grid. We’ll know we’ve succeeded when all the equipment we use to mount our campaign is rendered completely useless.”

Postures loosened. Laughter again reverberated among the G-men (and women—this was 2012 after all). And as far as I could tell, everyone seemed genuinely relieved by my assessment. They could go back to focusing on more pressing matters.

The joke opened the door to further conversation concerning the media’s central role in amplifying the power of Anonymous. One CSIS agent shared his anger at the media for making this collective of collectives more powerful than they ought to have been. I was, I have to admit, relishing the fact that the G-men and Anons, mutually opposed at one level, were nevertheless (very loosely) allied in holding an ambivalent attitude toward the mass media. We all agreed that the media had helped to make Anonymous what it was today.

Then the resident CSIS anthropologist, whose specialty was Middle East terrorism, made an offhand comment that shocked even me: jihadists, he explained, were impressed by the level of media attention Anonymous attained. *Did I hear that correctly*, I wondered? I just could not fathom Al Qaeda operatives watching Anonymous videos, much less grasping the nature of their culture or politics, and especially not the lulz. I imagined that jihadists would be rather repelled by Anonymous's secular, infidel, offensive practices. Laughing heartily together, we all agreed that those jihadist terrorists likely did not celebrate the lulz (or were utterly devoid of them). The conversation reminded me of something one Anon had told me during an informal online chat:

<A>: yeah, it's that idea of humor and irreverence which is at the heart of this [Anonymous]

<A>: it's what will stop it ever being able to be labeled terrorist

Despite the laughter, I still felt rather uncomfortable and hyper-aware of my mask of scholarly detachment. Appearing cool and composed on the outside, on the inside I was thinking to myself, *I can't believe I am joking about jihadists, Anonymous, and the lulz with CSIS!* I wanted nothing more than to leave—which I finally did at the conclusion of lunch. I was relieved to return to my hotel. I tried to push away the creeping thought that my room at the Lord Elgin Hotel in downtown Ottawa, booked by CSIS, was bugged.

Even today, I am not sure how I feel about my decision to visit CSIS; in those situations, one can divulge, quite unwillingly, important information, even when officials are not expressly seeking or asking for anything particular. Maybe there is something unethical, too, about disclosing how important the media is in amplifying Anonymous's power—a bit like drawing open a curtain to reveal that the Wizard is a little old man pulling at the levers of a machine. On the other hand, the media's power is an open secret within

Anonymous, a topic routinely discussed by the activists themselves.

In hindsight, and for better or worse, I believe some element of the trickster spirit nudged me to accept CSIS's invitation. Tricksters, like the Norse god Loki, have poor impulse control. They are driven by lust or curiosity. Intrigue propelled me to visit CSIS, despite my anxiety and reservations. I had a burning question that I needed answered: would they laugh at the lulz? So I guess, like trolls, "I did it for the lulz." Thanks to my glimpse inside Canada's spy agency, I got my answer: the lulz can be (nearly) universally appreciated. But I learned even more than that, thanks to the other anthropologist in the room. That final joke about the jihadists and the lulz taught me another lesson about Anonymous, which is important to convey as we start this adventure.

No single group or individual can claim legal ownership of the name "Anonymous," much less its icons and imagery. Naturally, this has helped Anonymous spread across the globe. It has now become the quintessential anti-brand brand, assuming various configurations and meanings, even as it has also become the popular face of unrest around the globe. Even if the name "Anonymous" is free to take—as Topiary, an Anonymous activist, put it before he was arrested, "You cannot arrest an idea"—the jihadist example is a powerful reminder that its radical openness does not mean everyone can or even wants to embrace the name or its attendant imagery. Culture has a funny way of asserting itself, even among a group of activists who seek to defy boundaries and who have erected one of the most accessible, resilient, and open domains of activism today.

Indeed, by the time I visited CSIS in 2012, Anonymous had become multitudinous, prolific, and unpredictable. Of course, since the collective is a by-product of the Internet, it is unsurprising that Anonymous rises up most forcefully and shores up most support when defending values associated with this global communication platform, like free speech. As one

participant once put it, “Free speech is non-negotiable.” But what they have demonstrated time and again is they are not restricted to a concern with civil liberties. Over the last five years, activists have contributed to an astonishing array of causes, from publicizing rape cases (as they did in Halifax, Canada, and Steubenville, Ohio) to assisting in the Arab and African Spring of 2011.

Various factors conspire to secure the group’s flexibility. There are no agreed-upon mandates to uphold. Participants associated with Anonymous steadfastly resist institutionalization. Its reputation is difficult to sully. You don’t even need to be a hacker (no, really) to participate in Anonymous operations. The group’s bold, Hollywood-style aesthetics strike a familiar chord in the society of the spectacle. And when Anonymous reacts to world events, it engages in a broad range of activities, with leaking and exposing security vulnerabilities acting as two of its signal interventions.

All these elements—which also come together in different proportions and configurations—make it almost impossible to know when or why Anonymous will strike, when a new node will appear, whether a campaign will be successful, and how the group might change direction or tactics during the course of an operation. Its unpredictability may be what makes Anonymous so frightening to governments and corporations across the world.

Although devilishly hard to study, Anonymous is neither wholly random nor simply chaotic. To be Anonymous means to follow a series of related principles. Anonymous follows a spirit of humorous deviance, works through diverse technical bodies (such as IRC), is built on an anti-celebrity ethic, and intervenes politically in astoundingly rich and varied ways. This book will seek to unravel some of the complexities and paradoxes inherent to a politically engaged Anonymous—but before we turn to its activist interventions, let’s take a close look at the grisly underworld of trolling from which Anonymous hatched.

CHAPTER I

On Trolls, Tricksters, and the Lulz

Prior to 2008, when Anonymous unexpectedly sprouted an activist sensibility, the brand had been used exclusively for what, in Internet parlance, is known as “trolling”: the targeting of people and organizations, the desecration of reputations, and the spreading of humiliating information. Despite the fame Anonymous accrued in its mass trolling campaigns, it was certainly not the only player in the game; the trolling pantheon was then, and remains today, both large and diverse. Trolling is a multifarious activity that flourishes online and boasts a range of tight-knit associations (such as the Patriotic Nigras, Bantown, Team Roomba, Rustle League), a variety of genres (differentiated mostly by target—for example, grievers target gamers, RIP trolls target the families and friends of the recently deceased), and a small pantheon of famed individuals (*Violentacrez*, *Jameth*). Its originary point extends far before the alpha of the Internet, taking root in the vagaries of myth and oral culture. Despite this diversity, contemporary Internet trolls are united in an almost universal claiming of lulz as the causal force and desired effect of their endeavors. Our story can begin with one of the most notorious pursuants.

One day, completely out of the blue, I received a phone call from one of the most famous trolls of all time: Andrew

Auernheimer, known to most simply as “weev.” He reached out to me on August 28, 2010, in a sixty-second phone message:

Yes, Ms. Coleman. This is weev. That is W-E-E-V and you might be familiar with my work. I see that you are giving a presentation on hackers, trolls, and the politics of spectacle. And I just want say that I am *the* master of the spectacle. This is my art, ma’am. And also you have given some sort of presentation on the lulz and I was in the room when the lulz was first said. So I want to make sure that you’re interpreting and representing my culture, and my people, correctly. I don’t want some charlatan that is telling lies about my history and my culture. So I would like to talk with you some and understand what you are doing to make sure that you not just another bullshit academic. So hit me up, my email is gluttony@XXX.com. That is G-L-U-T-T-O-N-Y at XXX dot com. I expect a response, Ms. Coleman. It is *extremely* important.

After listening, I was so startled I actually dropped the phone. I was overcome with excitement. But also fear. I picked the phone up, rapidly punched in a seemingly endless stream of numbers, listened to the message three more times, recorded it, and promptly went home, only to spend the rest of the evening brooding. I wished he had never called.

weev’s reputation obviously preceded him; despite my rudimentary research on trolls and my ongoing research on the activism of Anonymous, I had avoided him like the bubonic plague. Although trolling is often experienced and disguised as play, it is also shrouded in mystery, danger, and recklessness. weev is a past president of one of the most exclusive trolling cliques still in existence today, the offensively named Gay Nigger Association of America (GNAA). (Affiliates quiz prospective members on trivia about an obscure porn film called *Gayniggers from Outer Space*, which inspired the group’s name.) Reaching out to such a revolting troll might

spell trouble. Trolls are notorious for waging so-called “ruin life” campaigns, in which they spread humiliating stories (regardless of truthfulness) about a chosen target, and leak vital information like addresses and Social Security numbers. The effect is akin to being cursed, branded, and stigmatized all at once. The psychological effects can be terrifyingly long lasting.¹

But since I also ran a risk by ignoring his request—he did, after all, flag it as extremely important—I sent him an email a few days later. And, since I had already taken the plunge, I also figured it might make sense to acquaint myself with another genre of trolling. In contrast to weev’s boastful, elitist, self-aggrandizing style, Anonymous had historically demonstrated a far more self-effacing and populist mode of trolling. Like two sides of a coin, both belonged to the same “tribe” while also countering one another. For about two minutes I even entertained, with faint excitement, the prospect of detailing a troll typology. Just as my anthropological ancestors once categorized tribes, skulls, and axes, perhaps I could do the same with trolls and their horrible exploits, trollishly playing, all the while, with my discipline’s historical penchant for irrelevant and sometimes racist categorization. Quickly the excitement faded as I contemplated the ruinous reality this could bring down upon me if I got on the wrong side of these notorious trolls; I remembered that I had already decided to focus on the activism of Anonymous and not its trolling heyday for a very good reason. In the end, I hoped weev would ignore the email from me sitting in his inbox.

But, when he emailed me back, I realized there was nothing to do but commit. We finally connected via Skype chat. His handle was “dirk diggler,” after the porn star protagonist of the 1997 film *Boogie Nights*. Later, when we switched to IRC, he used “weev”:

<dirk diggler>: how are you?

<biella>: good and you?

<dirk diggler>: coming down off of some vile substance
 <biella>: you are up early
 <dirk diggler>: methylenedioxypropylone i think it was called
 <dirk diggler>: its late, technically
 <dirk diggler>: as i havent slept
 <biella>: i woke up at 3 am but that is not all that usual for me
 <dirk diggler>: i am working on my latest shitstorm right now
 <dirk diggler>: disruptive technological developments are gr8
 <biella>: you are pretty adept at that as well
 <dirk diggler>: yes i am switching from the mdpv to the coffee
 <dirk diggler>: i am hoping this will smooth the downward spiral long enough for me to ship this motherfucker live today
 <biella>: no chance you will be in nyc in the near future, is there?
 <dirk diggler>: probably not
 <dirk diggler>: its a vile city
 <biella>: haha, really?
 <dirk diggler>: disgusting place
 <biella>: how come?
 <dirk diggler>: the only decent people in NYC are the black israelites
 <dirk diggler>: nyc is a city founded on the repulsive order of the financiers

His denunciation of “the repulsive order of the financiers” had the ring of truth, given the recent financial mess their recklessness had engendered, so I found myself, only minutes into my first bona fide conversation with a world famous troll, in agreement with him:

<biella>: that is true
 <dirk diggler>: it is a sinful and decadent place
 <biella>: there are less and less spaces for the non-rich
 <dirk diggler>: and wherever immoral people are in control, i find that everyone tries to emulate them
 <biella>: Detroit is like the only city were there is possibility imho (big city)
 <dirk diggler>: nah slab city has the best potential in all of the USA

<dirk diggler>: part of god's war is going on right there right now
<biella>: never been

It is true: I had not spent time in Slab City. It was, in fact, the first time I had even heard about it. And so, as we chatted, I was also googling “Slab City,” which actually exists and is a fascinating Wild West campground/squatter haven in Colorado. I soon came to learn that even if weev often lies, he also often speaks the truth, and his knowledge of the strange, fantastical, and shocking is encyclopedic—he is a natural ethnographer of the most extreme and vile forms of human esoterica.

By dedicating much of his teenage and early adult years to hacking and trolling—and the consumption of large quantities of drugs, if he is to be believed—weev had amassed a vast catalog of technical and human exploits. His most famous coup, which won him a three-and-a-half-year jail sentence, was directed at AT&T, a beloved target among hackers because of its cozy information-sharing practices with the US government. (AT&T's well-known activities in room 641A, a telecommunication interception facility operated by the NSA, now seem quaint given the news that most major telecommunications providers and Internet companies provide the US government generous access to customer data.) weev targeted AT&T with Goatse Security, the name given to GNAA's impromptu security group. They discovered in June 2010 that the giant American telco had done something stupid and irresponsible: AT&T's iPad customer data was posted on the Internet unprotected. Typically, a company with good security practices will encrypt things like customer names, email addresses, and the unique ID numbers associated with these iPads. But AT&T had not, at least in this instance, encrypt anything.

While they didn't exactly leave the customer data sitting on a doorstep with a sign saying “Come and Get It,” the data was still unusually easy to access. Indeed, Goatse Security

figured out an easy way to “slurp” the data using a script (a short, easy-to-use computer program), which was written by GNAA/Goatse member Daniel Spitler, aka “JacksonBrown.” The gray hat security crew called it, with uncanny precision, the “iPad 3G Account Slurper” and used it to harvest the data of 140,000 subscribers. The opportunity to expose shoddy security of this magnitude is irresistible to any hacker—even one like weev who, as he told me over dinner when we finally met in person, is not even that talented of a technologist (or, perhaps more likely, he is just too lazy to do the grunt work since he certainly grasps many of the finer technical points pertaining to security).

Whatever the case, Spitler wrote the script itself and has since pleaded guilty in court. And yet weev was also convicted in November 2012 for “hacking” AT&T’s system: a violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA). But the fact remains: since there was no security to speak of, there was nothing, technically, to “hack.” Daniel Spitler’s script did not compromise an otherwise secure system, and weev—who contributed minor improvements to the script—mostly acted as the publicist. He offered the vulnerability to news outlets for free. He was interested in exposing AT&T’s shocking lack of security in the public interest and boosting his public profile. The CFAA, it must be said, is a decidedly blunt legal instrument—so broad that it affords prosecutors tremendous power in any legal proceeding that relates, in virtually any way, to the vague notion of “unauthorized computer access.” The activities need not be hacking at all. Some courts have interpreted “unauthorized access” to mean computer use that simply violates the terms of service or other rules posed by the computer’s owner.²

After his CFAA conviction, weev’s case attracted a trio of topnotch lawyers: Orin Kerr, Marcia Hofmann, and Tor Ekeland. They appealed his case, seeking to overturn what they, along with many security professionals, deemed a dangerous precedent capable of chilling vital future security

research; the security industry relies on hackers and researchers discovering vulnerabilities, using the same methods as criminal hackers, in order to expose weakness and strengthen infrastructure for both private and public good. Finally, in April 2014—and only after he had served roughly twelve months of a forty-one-month sentence—his case was vacated. But not due to the the CFAA portion of the appeal—instead due to the question of venue. The court determined that New Jersey, where the original case was tried, was not the state where the offense was committed. Tor Ekeland explained the importance of this legal ruling to the *Guardian*: “If the court had ruled the other way, you would have had universal venue in ... computer fraud and abuse cases, and that would have had huge implications for the Internet and computer law.”³ Still, although weev’s supporters were thrilled that he was now free and pleased that questions of venue had been clarified, many were disappointed that the proceedings left the broader CFAA issue untouched—the dangerous precedent remained.

By taking this information to the media, weev demonstrated an intent beyond mere trolling. Any self-respecting hacker will cry foul in the face of terrible security; taking it to the press—which will generate a huge fuss about it—can be a responsible thing to do. Of course, to hear weev tell the story, it was clear that he also did it for the lulz. He would giggle whenever Goatse Security was mentioned in news reports about the incident. He imagined millions of people Googling the strange name of the security group, and then recoiling in horror at the sight of a vile “anal supernova” beaming off their screen.⁴ Goatse is a notoriously grotesque Internet image of a man hunched over and pulling apart his butt cheeks wider than you might think is humanly possible. Those who view it are forever unable to unsee what they have just seen—unable to forget even the smallest detail, their minds seared by the image as if the gaping maw, adorned with a ring, were a red-hot cattle brand. The immaturity of the joke would escalate weev’s giggles into tears, which spilled out the sides of his pinched eyes; he would

hunch over, holding his stomach as his shoulders shook, his laugh like a demonic jackhammer.

Clearly, weev offended everyone, including law enforcement. The ultimate testament to his incendiary nature is, perhaps, the judge's rather stiff sentence. After all, he was not even party to writing the script. The night before his sentencing, he wrote on reddit, a popular nerd website, that "My regret is being nice enough to give AT&T a chance to patch before dropping the dataset to Gawker. I won't nearly be as nice next time."⁵ To justify the sentence, the prosecution cited his reddit comments not once, not twice, but three times.

For weev, such incendiary behavior is par for the course. He has recorded hateful speeches railing against Jews and African Americans—"sermons," as he calls them—which can be viewed on YouTube. They are so hateful that they even disgust other trolls.

We started chatting soon after his legal troubles relating to AT&T began. During the next five months we chatted often. There were some moments that can only be described as strange. Take, for instance, a conversation that occurred on December 12, 2010:

```
<weev>: hello there
<weev>: how are you
<biella>: pretty good and you?
<weev>: cant complain
<weev>: GNAA has switched forms of governance
<weev>: it is now an Athenian democracy
<weev>: where those who have completed their military service
<weev>: i.e. done any cool trolling
<weev>: are now eligible to vote on measures
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I was, I recall vividly, incredulous. But I still managed, barely, to type a response:

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<biella>: really?
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Then out of the blue, as is often the case with internet chatting—especially with weev—he hopped to another topic while I was in the midst of responding to questions of governance:

<weev>: my bondsman called me randomly
<biella>: what was it before? [before becoming an Athenian democracy]
<weev>: yes
<weev>: i suspect i may be arrested tomorrow or on the 16th
<weev>: i am having to divide up responsibilities
<weev>: because nobody can do all the shit i did
<biella>: 4 real?
[...]
<biella>: i mean why do you think you are being arrested?
<weev>: my bondsman called me randomly
<weev>: to verify my current location
<weev>: last time that happened
<weev>: the door got kicked in the next day

At the time he was under investigation. I know he was a troll and all but, let's face it: jail sucks. I told him I would visit and expressed my sympathies:

<weev>: thank you
<weev>: i will enjoy the company
<biella>: and gluten free treats that i will bring
<weev>: :D
<weev>: i just discovered
<weev>: how to make a passable gluten free bread
<weev>: u gotta just use a variety of shit
<weev>: brown rice, tapioca and taff flours
<weev>: and potato starch

It was natural, then, that weev, a gluten-free troll chatting with a gluten-free anthropologist, would seamlessly transition into a discussion of Pilates. Regrettably, I never did get a proper answer on the subject of troll governance. Many

conversations followed this unpredictable, always entertaining, arc.

I was earnest with him for the most part, but I played along with his self-styled hoaxer role. At the same time, I couldn't resist calling him out on his bullshit sometimes, even trolling him just a little:

<weev>: i have a very broad range of knowledge for a highschool dropout
 <biella>: except you studied anthro at James Madison :-)
 <weev>: yes well
 <biella>: but you do have a broad range of knowledge
 <weev>: i am just a poor country boy from arkansas
 <weev>: i dropped out of college because it was too much for my simple southern mind
 <weev>: plus i was disgusted at the degeneracy of american institutions
 <weev>: all the social sciences have become an elaborate scheme for giving white kids racial inferiority complexes, or destroying the gender roles that make our society work

As a social science professor, I had some insider knowledge of this “elaborate scheme.” I could not help but feed him some of my own lies:

<biella>: omg totally
 <weev>: or otherwise promoting judeo-bolshevist/marxist idologues
 <biella>: they secretly train us to do that (it is quite intensive)
 <weev>: i dont know if ur being sarcastic or sincere
 <weev>: is the hilarious part
 <biella>: lol
 <biella>: welcome to biella's world of chatting with weev as well :-)

He did in fact serve jail time in various states, ending up in New Jersey where he was released on bail February 28, 2011, to await trial. Since he was no longer allowed online, our chats came to an end. Instead, we continued to converse in person,

over gluten-free food, in NYC. I footed the bill since he was really, really broke. Although he did teach me a fair bit about trolling, he never used his skills on me.

Although weev's bail conditions banned him from using a computer, he still managed to practice his craft. weev, like many trolls, likes to dupe people in order to draw attention to himself. Putting oneself in the limelight feels great, especially if you don't need to pay a PR person to post a fake sex tape. In May 2011, as summer finally descended on NYC, he excitedly texted me. "Google my name," he wrote. I did as commanded, and hundreds of news articles popped up on my browser. He had duped the media with an in-person hoax, claiming to be Dominique Strauss-Kahn's neighbor immediately after rape charges were leveled against the wealthy French politician and former head of the International Monetary Fund. weev, then utterly destitute, managed to slip his comments into hundreds of newspapers; no journalist bothered to fact-check him:

Despite the prosecutor's claims, however, Strauss-Kahn is already meeting his neighbors. An infamous computer hacker who lives in the corporate apartment building on Broadway claims he has already met the Frenchman—and he is 'an OK guy'.

'We're all like one big Breakfast Club in there,' Andrew Auernheimer, 26, was reported as saying in reference to the 1985 classic film about five high school students trapped in Saturday detention.⁶

In Lulz We Trust

So if weev, like so many trolls, dishes out his actions on mixed platters of truth and lies, is it possible to determine whether he was actually in the room when the "lulz" first whooshed off the tip of a tongue? To probe this question further, let's turn

to Encyclopedia Dramatica (ED), a stunningly detailed online compendium cataloging troll mechanics, history, gore, and lore. Despite bearing the title “Encyclopedia,” it strives neither for neutrality nor objectivity. ED is, indeed, encyclopedic in its detail—but it is also outrageous in tone and riddled with lies. What ED does well (and in this way it actually achieves a strange measure of objectivity) is display the moral kinetics of trolling. Is ED’s etymologizing of the lulz, a snippet of which is provided below, fact or fable?:

L L L L is a corruption of *L O L*, which stands for “Laugh Out Loud,” signifying laughter at someone else’s expense. This makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humor. Anonymous gets big lulz from pulling random pranks. The pranks are always posted on the internet. Just as the element of surprise transforms the physical act of love into something beautiful, the anguish of a laughed-at victim transforms lol into lulz, making it longer, girthier, and more pleasurable. Lulz is engaged in by Internet users who have witnessed one major economic/environmental/political disaster too many, and who thus view a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world’s current apocalyptic state, as superior to being continually emo.

The term “lulz” was first coined by Jameth, an original Encyclopedia Dramatica administrator, and the term became very popular on that website. The nickname originated sometime in early 2001 when James (his real name, the -th suffix being a pun on his faggotry and his small p3n0r) was having a conversation with a lisping homosexual. James was being referred to as *Jameth* because of the person’s speech impediment. In June 2001, James decided to use Jameth as his LiveJournal account name. Don’t let him fool you—James craves the cock.⁷

According to information from multiple interviews, including one with ED’s sharp and witty founder, Sherrod DeGrippe,

weev did, indeed, participate in the conference call when Jameth coined the term; and Jameth is, in fact, gay. I never inquired about his lisp.⁸

Today, the lulz can encompass lighthearted jokes as well, and are utilized and enjoyed by many Internet nerds around the world. But, at its inception, its demeanor was conceived as cruel—“laughter at the expense or the misfortune of others,” is how trolls like to define it. Lulz is a quintessential example of what folklorists define as argot—specialized and esoteric terminology used by a subcultural group. Since argot is so opaque and particular, it functions to enact secrecy or, at minimum, erect some very stiff social boundaries. As an anthropologist, it is tempting, no matter how ridiculous it seems, to view lulz in terms of epistemology—through the social production of knowledge. At one level, the lulz functions as an epistemic object, stabilizing a set of experiences by making them available for reflection. For decades, there was no term for the lulz, but trolls and hackers nevertheless experienced the distinctive pleasures of pranking. Once a name like “lulz” comes into being, it opens the very practice it names to further reflection by its practitioners. Trolls now pontificate over the meaning of the lulz, employing the term to designate particularly satisfying acts (whether or not they are intentionally done for the lulz) and also to diagnose situations lacking in lulz—which, of course, demands reparatory courses of action.

Just what does the term do or signify which no other word can? This is harder to convey. But if we keep in mind that lulz derives from the acronym “lol” (laugh out loud), it becomes easier to see that lulz is primarily about humor. Lols are familiar to everyone who has ever sent a joke to someone by email. Lulz are darker: acquired most often at someone’s expense, prone to misfiring and, occasionally, bordering on disturbing or hateful speech (except, of course, when they cross the border entirely: thank you rape jokes). Lulz are unmistakably imbued with danger and mystery, and thus speak foremost to the pleasures of transgression.

We can see the defining features of lulz in weev's AT&T affair—not in his exposure of the security hole, but in the way he got respectable newscasters all over the United States to utter the word “Goatse,” unwittingly referencing one of the most disgusting images on the Internet. In practice, lulzy activity defies boundaries but also re-erects them. There is a divide between people who are merely LOLing on the Internet—without really knowing what the Internet is or where it came from or how it works on the inside—and those who are lulzing (i.e., hackers, trolls, etc.) and know exactly what the underbelly is about. The lulz are both a form of cultural differentiation and a tool or weapon used to attack, humiliate, and defame the unwitting normal LOLers—often without them even realizing that an entire culture is aligned against them. Usually, the lulz are inside jokes, but (often) they are equal opportunity: lulz may provoke laughter not just among trolls, but outsiders as well. The price of admission is just a bit of knowledge. LOLers can be drawn into the world of lulz thanks to websites populated by trolls like Encyclopedia Dramatica, 4chan, and Something Awful, which disseminate this knowledge to anyone who cares to look for it. Those who find it may choose to run away very quickly, or they might become the next generation of trolls.

The lulz show how easily and casually trolls can upend our sense of security by invading private spaces and exposing confidential information. Targets receive scores of unpaid pizzas at home or have their unlisted phone numbers published, Social Security numbers leaked, private communications posted, credit card numbers doxed, and hard drive contents seeded. Trolls enjoy desecrating anything remotely sacred, as cultural theorist Whitney Phillips conveys in her astute characterization of trolls as “agents of cultural digestion [who] scavenge the landscape, re-purpose the most offensive material, then shove the resulting monstrosities into the faces of an unsuspecting populace.”⁹ In short: any information thought to be personal, secure, or sacred is a prime target for sharing or

defilement in a multitude of ways. Lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, and our aesthetic sensibilities. Any presumption of our world's inviolability becomes a weapon; trolls invalidate that world by gesturing toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it—to pull the carpet from under us whenever they feel the urge.

I came to trolls just as a subset of them was experiencing a crucial transformation: increasingly, people working under the aegis of Anonymous began pursuing activism. Given the seedy underbelly I have just described, the development was beyond surprising. However, it was not without historical precedent: I recognized trolls as kin to the tricksters of myth. After all, I am an anthropologist, and tricksters are a time-honored topic of anthropological rumination.

To Trick or to Treat?

The trickster archetype comes replete with a diverse number of icons and often-delightful tales. Greek and Roman mythology brought some of these figures into the heart of Western culture: the mercurial Hermes and the bacchanalian Dionysus, among others. In West African and Caribbean folklores the role falls to Anansi, a spider who sometimes imparts knowledge or wisdom—and sometimes casts doubt or seeds confusion. Eshu, the god of communication and crossroads, is similarly ambiguous. Known for orchestrating chaotic scenarios that force human decisions, he can be a kind teacher or an agent of destruction. Among indigenous North Americans, Raven initiates change by will or by accident, and Coyote is a selfish beast who will trick any being—human or animal—to satisfy his appetites. The Western conception of the trickster has, since the medieval period, often been delivered in literature. Puck, the “shrewd and knavish sprite” who “misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm” in *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, was not an invention of Shakespeare's, but has roots in a mischievous fairy of Celtic folklore. The shapeshifter Loki of Nordic mythology has recently reappeared in Hollywood films, mostly as a bland version of his mythological self, and still serves as a reminder of the capricious, vindictive role the trickster can perform.

Tricksters are united by a few characteristics, such as the burning desire to defy or defile rules, norms, and laws. Often lacking both impulse control and the ability to experience shame, they are outrageous and unfiltered in their speech. Some tricksters are driven by a higher calling, like Loki, who sometimes works for the gods (though true to his fearsome nature, he sometimes causes problems for them). Many are propelled by curiosity and voracious appetite. They rarely plan their actions, choosing instead an unbridled spontaneity that translates into a wily unpredictability. While capriciousness often underwrites successful trickster exploits, it can also trip trolls up.¹⁰

Trickster tales are not didactic and moralizing but reveal their lessons playfully. They can function normatively—when parents offer scary stories to dissuade kids from misbehaving—or critically, allowing norms to be laid bare for folk-philosophical challenge. Lewis Hyde, who has written extensively on the trickster motif, notes that “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be a space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on.”¹¹

It is not difficult to imagine the troll and Anonymous as contemporary trickster figures. They are provocateurs and saboteurs who dismantle convention while occupying a liminal zone. They are well positioned to impart lessons—regardless of their intent. Their actions need not be accepted, much less endorsed, to extract positive value. We may see them as edifying us with liberating or terrifying perspectives, symptomatic of underlying problems that deserve scrutiny, functioning as a positive force toward renewal, or as distorting and confusing

shadows. The trickster becomes one heuristic—certainly not the only or primary one—for understanding the sources, the myriad effects, and especially, the Janus face of morally slippery entities like trolls and Anonymous.

Before we get to Anonymous proper, it is worth taking a brief (incomplete) tour through the vibrant tradition of trolling/tricksterdom on the Internet. The nature of the Internet—a network built on software—makes it ideal for both play and exploitation;¹² it is like a petri dish for pranking. Indeed, hackers (and later trolls) have been at this sort of behavior for a long time. But it is only recently that some of these activities have attained a more visible, publicly available mythological status. For example, gathered in the Encyclopedia Dramatica are copious links to cases of historical techno-tricksterism. By exploring these lineages we can better understand what makes Anonymous—both the trolls and activists—distinctive among a broader pantheon of technological tricksters.

A (Brief) Natural History of Internet Tricksterdom (Or, a Genealogy of a Lack of Morals)

weev is a troll's troll—a rare standout in a field that mostly spawns so many garden varieties.

Troll ancestry boasts a rather eclectic and varied cast of characters. Trolling was common in the hacker underground—a place for subversive hackers who thrived in the 1980s and 1990s, seeking out forbidden knowledge by rummaging around, uninvited, in other people's computers. But even they have to thank their direct ancestors, the phone phreaks, for the aesthetics of audacity. Fusing technological spelunking with mischief, phone phreaks illegally entered the telephone system by re-creating the audio frequencies used by the system to route calls. They did it to learn and explore, to be sure. But the thrill of transgression was equally integral to the joy of phreaking. In the 1960s and 1970s, phreaks would use their

skills to congregate on telephone conference “party lines.” Phreaking attracted some blind kids, who found a source of freedom in connecting with others on the phone. Over the telephone wires, from near and far, people who couldn’t see each other would meet to chat, gossip, share technological tidbits, and plan and execute pranks. Lots of pranks. Naturally, most of these pranks involved phone calls. While most of them were lighthearted, a few exhibited a fearsome bite. Phil Lapsley, a historian of phreaks, recounts an infamous 1974 hoax where phreaks exploited a rare bug in the phone system to reroute all calls made to residents of Santa Barbara, California, to a phony emergency worker who would warn: “There has been a nuclear explosion in Santa Barbara and all the telephone lines are out.”¹³ weev, no stranger to history, adores phone pranks and sees himself as an inheritor of this illustrious lineage.

The end of the analog phone network, after the divestiture of “Ma Bell” (the affectionate name given to AT&T by phreaks), spelled the end of the golden age of phreaking. It was largely replaced by the exploration of computer networks, giving rise to the hacker underground, which peaked in the 1990s. Although many of these underground hackers acquired, circulated, and produced technical knowledge—scouting for security vulnerabilities and edifying technical curiosities—they were also connoisseurs of forbidden fruit. Thus, it is no wonder that their actions expanded from strictly technical engagements and into ones that included mockery, spectacle, and transgression. They quickly distinguished their politics and ethics from the university hackers of MIT, Carnegie Mellon, and Stanford; these hackers, who in the 1960s stayed up all night to access their beloved computers otherwise tied up for official use during the day, have been chronicled majestically by journalist Steven Levy.¹⁴ Though these early hackers also had an affinity for pranking, they abided by a more robust ethos of transparency and access than underground hackers.

Many underground hackers were puckish in their pranking and hacking pursuits. They were mischief-makers and merry wanderers of the network. There was, however, a cohort of underground hackers who more closely resembled the Loki archetype in their network jaunts and haunts. When I interview hackers who were active in the 1990s about their trolling activities, the conversation inevitably turns toward a discussion of the most feared hacker/troll of the era: “u4ea” (pronounced “euphoria” and eerily similar to “lulz” in its figuration). So terrifying was this troll’s reign that every time I utter u4ea to one of his contemporaries, their demeanor blackens and proceedings assume an unmatched seriousness. u4ea is Canadian. More notoriously, this troll was “founder, president, and dictator for life” of hacker group BRoTHeRHooD oF WaReZ—(“BoW” for short; Warez is pirated software—“BoW” sought to poke fun at Bulletin Board System warez groups). According to a former member whom I chatted with online, the “paramilitary wing” of BoW, called “Hagis” (short for “Hackers against Geeks in Snowsuits”), went on cruel hacking and pranking campaigns against targets ranging from corporations, law-abiding white hat hackers, and infosecurity gurus, to basically anyone else who got in their line of fire. To take one example, in the late 1990s Hagis went ballistic during a multi-year feud with a white hat hacker named Jay Dyson. First they went after his Internet service provider, deleting *all* their files and knocking them offline for two weeks. Later, they deleted files on Dyson’s business website. For good measure, they harassed his wife with threatening messages, informing her, via her hacked email account, that “All the Dyson family will pay for the mistakes of Big Jay.”¹⁵

Upon learning about this and other attacks from the former BoW member I chatted with, I wrote:

<biella>: man, ruthless

<hacker>: yeah, we were a fairly vicious bunch to the point that i dropped out of the scene

<biella>: why? i mean, what was driving people? is it just because people could?

<hacker>: hell if i know now to be honest

<hacker>: there were massive hacker wars that went on that nobody knew about

<hacker>: irc servers would vanish, ISPs would be wiped off the face of the earth for days or weeks

<hacker>: but it stayed within the scene

<hacker>: the media only ever caught hints of it

<hacker>: i mean, this was a time when hackers didn't want attention, people who talked to the press were mediawhores

<hacker>: we were a genuine subculture, our own news, our own celebrities, our own slang, our own culture

And I could not help but add:

<biella>: and your own wars

Still, Hagis could also be quite jocular. Once, they defaced the Greenpeace website and posted what today might be considered a classically lulzy message meant to publicize the ordeal of an arrested phone phreak and hacker named Kevin Mitnick: “Phree Kevin Mitnick or we will club 600 baby seals.”¹⁶

After going this deep (which is to say, barely scratching the surface), I decided that my interlocutors were right: it was time to ease off on my pursuit of u4ea. Barely anything has been written about this famous troll—and for a good reason.

Trolling in the 1990s followed a different vector toward anonymity, as well. Outside of these elite, hidden hacker wars, ordinary users got their first bitter taste of trolling on Usenet, the seminal mega-message board. In 1979, the Internet existed as an academic and military network—the ARPANET—and access was limited to a select few. Naturally, a few engineers built a new system, Usenet, which they conceived of as the “poor man’s ARPANET.” Initially invented for the sole

purpose of discussing obscure technical matters, it quickly mushroomed—much to everyone’s surprise—to include hundreds of lists with spirited and, at times, ferocious discussions. Technical subject matter was complemented by groups devoted to sex, humor, recipes, and (naturally) anti-Scientology.

Usenet and other mailing lists are also where the term “troll” first came into common usage. It referred to people who did not contribute positively to discussions, who argued for the sake of arguing, or who were simply disruptive jerks (intentionally or not). List users frequently admonished others to “stop feeding the trolls,” a refrain still commonly seen today on mailing lists, message boards, and website comment sections.

But Usenet also bred and fed the spectacular breed of troll who would intentionally sabotage conversations—leaving both list members and, especially, list administrators, exasperated. There is no better example than Netochka Nezvanova, named after the titular character in Dostoevsky’s (failed) first attempt at a novel. Appropriately, the name means “nameless nobody.” And, just like Anonymous today, it is believed that many different individuals and groups have taken up the moniker, making it an apt example of what media scholar Marco Deseriis describes as a “multiple use name,” in which “the same alias” is adopted by “organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors.”¹⁷

Netochka Nezvanova’s artist statement, published online, captures the mad, spirited flair driving this character:

InterBody—Artistic Statement

Internet—where one may access the proposal + pertinent materials

Our bodies are the borders of our understanding.

The universes are the body. The Internet is the skin.

This is my Inter Body. I am Soft Wear.

When I am alone, I want you to enter inside me, I wish to wear you.

Dissolved and integrated, we are exploded into a nomadic, unstable topology of ceramic ribbons and microfluidic channels, of myriad phosphorescent gleams of the unassailable transpositions of the visible signs of the invisible and mysterious encounters in divisible dreams.

Upon reading this, you might like find yourself, as I did, digging her imaginative, Deleuzian sensibilities—unless you were on one of the mailing lists she demolished. Her character disrupted so frequently, with such adroitness, and on so many disparate lists and news groups, that different list administrators banded together on a dedicated list of their own, with the sole purpose of dealing with the trail of destruction she left behind. At my own current home university, McGill, she participated in a mailing list about Max, a visual programming language for music, audio, and media, but was booted in 2001 after threatening to sue particular list members. Here is a portion of the rationale for banning her:

Second, after “she” was thrown off the McGill list, “she” initiated [*sic*] what could best be described as a terror campaign that included spam to anyone who posted to the Max list, denial of service attacks, and threatening and slanderous email sent to random individuals at McGill. I didn’t see any point to subjecting myself and my co-workers to this type of harrassment [*sic*]. However, it turns out that many of these acts are felonies. If this behavior recommences, the victims of the behavior can pursue legal remedies, and I would strongly suggest they do so.

In reaction, someone on the list cried foul: “So, censorship once more.”¹⁸

In the 1990s, Usenet and many other booming mailing lists encouraged unrestrained free speech—and were celebrated

for it. But trolls like Netochka forced a debate, still with us today, about the limits of such speech: should mailing lists and webpage moderators curb offensive speech for the sake of civility, seen by some as necessary for a healthy community? Or should lists avoid censoring speech, no matter how objectionable, so that the Internet might be a place where free speech reigns unconditionally?

Of particular note—as we trace our trolling lineage through time—is the development of 4chan, an imageboard modeled on a popular Japanese imageboard called Futaba Channel, also known as 2chan (“chan” is short for “channel”). It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, where the populist type of trolling that is well known today first emerged. 4chan is unique for its culture of extreme permissibility—making questions of free speech largely irrelevant—fostered by a culture of anonymity embraced by its users. Naturally, it was on this board where the collective idea and identity of Anonymous emerged. Unlike Usenet, no one on 4chan is in the least bit disturbed by the uncivil speech that ricochets across the board every second of the day. In many respects, the board is explicitly conceived of as a say-anything zone: the grosser and more offensive, damn it, the better.

Since it launched in 2003, 4chan has become an immensely popular, iconic, and opprobrious imageboard. Composed of over sixty (at the time of this writing) topic-based forums ranging from anime to health and fitness, it is both the source of many of the Internet’s most beloved cultural artifacts (such as Lolcats memes), and one of its most wretched hives of scum and villainy. The “Random” forum, also called “/b/,” teems with pornography, racial slurs, and a distinctive brand of humor derived from defilement. It is where trolling once flourished. One “/b/tard” (as the forum’s denizens are called) explained to my class that “everyone should have a good sense that /b/ is an almost completely unfiltered clusterfuck of everything you could imagine, and lots of stuff you couldn’t

imagine or wouldn't want to." A post might include a naked woman with the demand: "rate my wife." The next post might feature a particularly hard-to-stomach image of a severely mutilated body, but might then be followed by a nugget of light humor:

File : [1291872411.jpg](#)-(10 KB 292x219, sodium-bicarbonate.jpg)



Anonymous 12/09/10(Thu)00:26:51
No.293326XXX
Just ate half a teaspoon of sodium bicarbonate wat do?

Anonymous 12/09/10(Thu)00:28:24
No.293326XXX
bump

Anonymous 12/09/10(Thu)00:29:12 No.283326XXX
[>>293326451](#)
that's not very much. I suggest water.
then burping.

Anonymous 12/09/10(Thu)00:33:06 No.293327XXX
FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF EAT MORE AND THEN CHUG
RED FOOD DIE AND VINEGAR AND WAIT FOR THE REACTION AND
RUN INTO THE NEAREST ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE AND YELL,
"I AM THE GOD OF VOLCANOES, TOAN GLADIUS!
BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBL!"

Generally speaking, though, much of the material is designed to be shocking to outsiders, a discursively constructed border fence meant to keep the uninitiated—aka "n00bs" or "newfags"—far, far away. (Nearly every category of person, from old-timers to new-timers, is labelled a "fag." On 4chan, it is both an insult and term of endearment. We will see the suffix many times in this book.) For insiders, it is the normal state of affairs, and one of the board's defining and appealing qualities.

On 4chan, participants are strongly discouraged from identifying themselves, and most post under the default name "Anonymous," as in the example above. Technically, 4chan

keeps logs of IP addresses and doesn't do anything to keep visitors from being identified. Unless users cloak their IP addresses before connecting, the site's founder, owner, and system administrator—Chris Poole, aka “moot”—has full access to them. He has even given them over to law enforcement to comply with legitimate investigations. (This policy is widely known among users.) But, in at least a practical sense (and at least between its users as peers), the board functions anonymously; except for rare exceptions, and the occasional instance where a subject of discussion must be identified using a photograph with a time stamp, users interact with no consistent nicknames or usernames. Posts are pushed off the front page very quickly—to be deleted from the server when they reach page 14—only surviving as long as users remain interested in the subject. It “lowers personal responsibility and encourages experimentation,” as media scholar Lee Knuttila put it.¹⁹ Experimentation includes generating memes (these are modifications of humorous images, videos, or catchphrases, some of which attain legendary status), fierce trolling campaigns masterminded by Anonymous (though this has been less common in recent years), and incessant taunting and vitriol of other users (such as egging on individuals with suicidal ideation to “just do it” and become “an hero”). It must be noted, however, that there is also an outpouring of compassionate and empathetic advice, especially for those looking for relationship help, or when someone discovers a video of a cat being tortured. But this aspect is rarely featured in the news.

All this occurs with the knowledge of impermanence. In contrast to mailing lists or many other kinds of online boards, there is no official archive. If a thread is not “bumped” back to the top by a time reply, it dies and evaporates. On an active channel, like /b/, this entire life cycle occurs in just minutes.

In this environment, it is difficult for a person to accrue status or reputation—much less fame. Against this backdrop of cacophonous experimentation and ephemera, a robust

collective memory and identity has nevertheless formed around legendary trolling campaigns, all sorts of insider jokes, and artifacts like image macros. Aesthetically, the more extreme a piece of content is, the better, for it ensures the interest of participants, and motivates replies to threads (keeping them alive). In particularly novel cases, an extreme piece of content can even circulate beyond the board—to distant lands like the message board community, reddit, or bodybuilding.com, and, eventually, mass cultural awareness. Remember, lolcats got their start on 4chan. Trolls, in particular, focus on the collective pursuit of epic wins—just one form of content among many. (To be clear, 4chan houses many trolls, but many participants steer clear of trolling activity. Still others avoid activity altogether—they are there as spectators or lurkers.)

It is almost impossible to pinpoint a day or event when trolling on 4chan was born. But by 2006, the name Anonymous was being used by participants to engage in trolling raids. These invasions would continue for many years, even after Anonymous was routinely deployed for activist purposes. For instance, in 2010 Anonymous sought to “ruin” a preteen girl named Jessi Slaughter after her homemade video monologues, which had gained some notoriety on tween gossip site StickyDrama, were posted on 4chan. Anonymous was stirred to action by Slaughter’s brazen boasts—she claimed in one video that she would “pop a glock in your mouth and make a brain slushie”—and published her phone number, address, and Twitter username, inundating her with hateful emails and threatening prank calls, circulating photoshopped images of her and satiric remixes of her videos. When her father recorded his own rant, claiming to have “backtraced” her tormenters and reported them to the “cyber police,” he also became an object of ridicule. Slaughter, described by /b/tards as a “lulzcow ... whore,” is now memorialized on Urban Dictionary as “The epitome of an eleven year old slut/poser/internet reject/scenecore wannabe.”

On the one hand, outlandish trolling raids and denigrating

statements like “lulzcow ... whore” (or “due to fail and AIDS” from the Habbo Hotel raids) function for 4chan users like a repellent meant to keep naive users far away from *their* Internet playground. On the other, when compared to most other arenas where trolls are bred—like weev’s GNAA—4chan is a mecca of populist trolling. By populist, I simply mean that 4chan membership is available to anyone willing to cross these boundaries, put in the time to learn the argot, and (of course) stomach the gore. The etiquette and techniques that 4chan users employ are only superficially elitist. A former student of mine offered me the following insight. Exceptionally smart, he was also a troll—or a “goon” to be more precise, since that’s what they call themselves on Something Awful, his website of choice at the time:

Something Awful is like the exclusive country club of the Internet, with a one-time \$10 fee, a laundry list of rules very particular to SA, moderators who ban and probate, and community enforcement of “Good Posts” through ridicule. 4chan on the other hand is an organic free-for-all that doesn’t enforce so much as engages an amorphous membership in a mega-death battle for the top humor spot. Anyone can participate in 4chan, and Internet fame isn’t possible in the same way it is on SA because everyone is literally anonymous.

Whatever unfolds on the board—a joke, a long conversation, or a three-day trolling campaign—anonymity is essential to 4chan; one might call anonymity both its ground rule and its dominant cultural aspect—a core principle inherited by Anonymous, even in its pseudonymous, material extension as hordes of Guy Fawkes—mask wearers. On 4chan, there is an interplay between the *function* of anonymity (enabling pure competition without the interference of reputation or social capital) and the *effects* of anonymity (the memes, hacks, and acts of trolling that emerge and have real impact on the

world). In contrast to weev's egoistic acts of trolling, 4chan's Anonymous "Internet Hate Machine" collective action absolves individuals of responsibility in the conventional sense, but not in a collective sense.²⁰ That is, Anonymous is open to anyone willing to subsume him- or herself into a collective capable of gaining fame through events like the Habbo Hotel raids. Absent of any individual recognition, each activity is ascribed to a collective *nom de plume*, a reincarnation of Netochka Nezvanova. On 4chan, participants will also shame those seeking fame and attention, calling them "namefags."

As a trolling outfit, Anonymous achieved considerable media notoriety, just like weev. The entity became, in certain respects, famous. However, while the trolling exploits of, on the one hand, Anonymous and 4chan users, and on the other hand, weev, are connected by their tactical approaches, they are also foils of each other. Regardless of how far and wide the fame of Anonymous spreads, personal identity and the individual remain subordinate to a focus on the epic win—and, especially, the lulz.²¹

This subsumption of individual identity into collective identity is unusual in Western culture. Understanding its uptake is crucial to our knowledge of how Anonymous, as an activist group, came to be. It is very possible that the unsavory nature of Anonymous's early trolling activities motivated collectivity as a security feature; participants probably had a desire to participate, to receive payment in lulz, without the risk of being identified and socially stigmatized. To understand these motivations, and the powerful significance of an individual's willingness to subsume his or her identity, we will briefly ruminate on the culture of fame-seeking—of individualistic celebrity—itself.

Anonymous's Trickster's Trick: Defying Individual Celebrity through Collective Celebrity

Fame-seeking pervades practically every sphere of American life today, from the mass media, which hires Hollywood celebrities as news anchors, to the micro-media platforms that afford endless opportunities for narcissism and self-inflation; from the halls of academia, where superstar professors command high salaries, to sports arenas, where players rake in obscene salaries. Fame-seeking behavior reinforces what anthropologist David Graeber, building on the seminal work of C. B. Macpherson, identifies as “possessive individualism,” defined as “those deeply internalized habits of thinking and feeling” whereby we view “everything around [us] primarily as actual or potential commercial property.”²²

How did 4chan—one of the seediest zones of the Internet—hatch one of the most robust instantiations of a collectivist, anti-celebrity ethic, without its members even intending to? This ethic thrived organically on 4chan because it could be executed in such an unadulterated form. During a lecture for my class, a former Anonymous troll and current activist explained the crucial role of 4chan in cementing what he designates as “the primary ideal of Anonymous”:

The posts on 4chan have no names or any identifiable markers attached to them. The only thing you are able to judge a post by is its content and nothing else. *This elimination of the persona, and by extension everything associated with it, such as leadership, representation, and status, is the primary ideal of Anonymous.* (emphasis added)

This Anon, who was lecturing anonymously on Skype to my ten enraptured students, immediately offered a series of astute qualifications about this primary ideal: the self-effacement of the individual. When Anonymous left 4chan in pursuit of activist goals in 2008, he explained, this ideal failed, often

spectacularly; once individuals interacted pseudonymously or met in person, status-seeking behaviors reasserted themselves. Individuals jockeyed and jostled for power.

Nevertheless, the taboo against fame-seeking was so well entrenched on 4chan, and was so valued for its success, that it largely prevented, with only a few exceptions, these internal struggles for status from spilling over into public quests for personal fame. (Later, we will see its greatest failure in the micro-ecologies of hacker teams like AntiSec and LulzSec, analogous to rock stars in their ability to amass fame and recognition, and—not surprisingly—to spark the ire of some Anons, even while being admired for their lulzy and political antics.)

Once Anonymous left 4chan to engage in activism, the anti-celebrity-seeking ideal became “more nuanced ... incarnating into the desire for leaderlessness and high democracy,” as this Anon put it. Attempts to put these principles into practice also resulted in missteps, particularly in the emergence of small teams with concentrations of power.

But despite the fragmentation into teams and cabals, the overarching ideals remained in play. Adherence meant “that anybody [could] call themselves Anonymous and rightfully claim the name,” as the lecturer explained. This freedom to take the name and experiment with it is precisely what enabled Anonymous to become the wily hydra it is today.

But if we peek behind the ideal—the notion that Anonymous is everyone’s property, an identity commons, so to speak—we see a much more complicated reality. And it was here, on this nuanced point, that this Anon ended his micro-lecture. I believe my students were both mesmerized and shocked that someone from Anonymous could be so smart and eloquent; I explained to them that Anonymous can be understood as what anthropologist Chris Kelty has jokingly called, *contra* the subaltern, the “superaltern”: those highly educated geeks who not only speak for themselves but talk back loudly and critically to

those who purport to speak for them.²³ The Anonymous guest lecturer continued:

Most of us are humor-driven. So it should be no surprise that we often contend with other Anon-claiming groups we find out of favor, such as ... the new activist-only Occupy Wall Street anons, or the conspiracy theorists and other overly serious entities claiming the name. It's true. We cannot deny them the name. But the important thing to take away from this talk is that nowhere in the Anonymous ideal was it ever stipulated that Anonymous must stand together with or even like other Anonymous. In fact, animosity and downright wars between Anonymous-claiming entities is right in line with the original internet-based projects carried out by cultural Anons.

It is here that we might comprehend the complexity of Anonymous. There is a singular subject and idea animating its spirit, and participants attempt to present this in a united front. For the media, it is tempting to buy into this branding wholesale—to present Anonymous as its values and its packaging. But the reality of the group's composition, in all its varied hues and tones, is impossible to present in any single sketch, even if Anonymous uses a single name. Its membership comprises too many different networks and working groups, each of which is at varying odds with one another in varying moments. The very nature of this collective of collectives means that the accumulation of too much power and prestige—especially at a single point in (virtual) space—is not only taboo but also functionally difficult.

4chan was ground zero for a robust anti-celebrity ethic, a value system opposed to self-aggrandizement and the apparatus of the mainstream media (one of the cancers killing /b/, as Anonymous likes to say). This ethic carried over to the activist incarnation of Anonymous. It is in these alternative practices of sociality—upending the ideological divide

between individualism and collectivism—that we can recognize trolling’s development into a principled weapon against monolithic banks and sleazy security firms. Collectivity is growing its market share: from the counter–corporate-controlled globalization movement of a decade ago, to Anonymous and the recent explosion of leaderless movements like Occupy. This is often entirely lost on the mainstream media, which can’t—or won’t—write a story that does not normalize the conversion of an individual into a celebrity or leader, complete with individual heroism or tragic moral failings. This, of course, is not the proclivity of journalism and journalists alone. Most of Western philosophy, and in turn, much of Western culture more generally, has posited the self—the individual—as the site of epistemic inquiry. It is hard to shake millenia of philosophical thinking on a topic—intellectual thinking that is also cultural common sense.

It is for this reason that Anonymous, whether in its trolling or activist incarnations, acted as a jujitsu-like force of trickery, its machinations incommensurable with the driving logic of the mainstream corporate media and dominant sensibilities of the self. It drove journalists a bit batty—which I got to witness first hand as I brokered, a bit trickster-like myself, between Anonymous and the media. I often helped the media cross the deep chasm in baby steps, as they tried to locate a leader, or at least a character, who might satisfy the implicit demands of their craft.

It is perhaps due to this very resistance to journalistic convention—to the desire to discover, reveal, or outright create a celebrity leader—that journalists were compelled to cover Anonymous. The hunt for a spokesperson, a leader, a representative, was in vain—at least, until the state entered the fray and began arresting hackers. But, for the most part, media outlets were offered few easy characters around which to spin a story.

What began as a network of trolls has become, for the most part, a force for good in the world. The emergence of

Anonymous from one of the seediest places on the Internet is a tale of wonder, of hope, and of playful illusions. Is it really possible that these ideals of collectivity and group identification, forged as they were in the hellish, terrifying fires of trolling, could transcend such an ordinary condition? Did the cesspool of 4chan really crystallize into one of the most politically active, morally fascinating, and subversively salient activist groups operating today? Somewhat surprisingly, yes. Let's see how.

Notes

Introduction: “And Now You Have Got Our Attention”

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