

Anonymous Analysis

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There used to be a time where the word Anonymous meant unremarkable, undistinguishable and impersonal. These days the term stands for something more philosophical, metaphorical, and thematic. The term draws parallels for privacy, unity and a little known hacktivist group known as Anonymous. Anonymous is a hacktivist collective of individuals who use modern day technology to stage protests, hack government and corporate databases, whistle-blowing and promoting the organization's ideals to the world. When they first started appearing and making waves, many dismissed the organization as childish, roguish and laughable. While many still maintain this perspective on the group, many cannot deny the impact the organization has had on the media, pop culture, hacking, protesting, and its effect to younger generations (most notable millennials). Anonymous has changed the way the world looks and understands hacktivism and modern day protesting. The organization has changed the way digital media is used in protesting, hacking, and gaining social influence.

In order to accurately understand the organization's impact on a global and media scale, we have to look at the organization's origins. The organization originated in the many forums that hailed from the infamous message board site 4chan. 4chan was created by entrepreneur Christopher Poole on October 1, 2003. The website, which was modeled after several Japanese message boards, was created as a forum for people to discuss pop culture topics. The website has a very simplistic design catered for easy navigation and entry to almost 50 themed boards where users can leave comments and post pictures, as well as discuss various topics. The website has no registration or account information, which means that there is no login required to use the site. This means that the average user just has a set of numbers that changes after each comment, which makes the users anonymous. This style of privacy and lack of user info inspired the group to take the name Anonymous. You don't know who you're talking to, which allows for a large

amount of privacy, which protects the user's private information such as name from physical identification. "4chan appears to see that secrecy as part of its ethos."(Dewey). Which is an integral part of Anonymous *mores operandi*. However because this increase privacy, it allows for many users to commit disturbing and trollish acts. The site has an incredibly nefarious reputation due it being a hotbed of memes, jokes, illegal activity, and trolling.

Over the course of several years it grew steadily in popularity and in size. "Between 2009 and 2011, 4chan grew from 5 million monthly unique visitors to 10 million. It now collects 22.5 million each month" (Alfonso). Over the years, it's created several controversies and incidents. One such event was that 4chan users ended up hacking and inserting strobe light videos on epileptic websites. This caused a lot of stir not just on the media but also from the website itself. These trolling events caused many, some even in government, to try to control or eliminate the site. Incidents like piracy, trolling of individuals and companies, child pornography, and black market deals gave the site an infamous and chaotic aura. Fortunately, Poole and the rest of the sites admins set rules on preventing crimes such as these, which while still being strictly moderated, happen occasionally. However, the website has done a lot of good as it assist with law enforcement all across the world to help find and hunt down criminals. This helps lead many on the site to be a part of Anonymous and use their skills to helping the organizations agenda.

Anonymous first garnered public attention in 2008 for their self-titled mission "Project Chanology" which was to expel Scientology's influence from the internet due to illegal actives of private data mining, indentured member servitude, and abuse of its tax exempt status. Anonymous released a video on January 21, 2008 detailing all the wrong doings of the church as well as other shadowing actions committed by the church. This video went viral and was a massive call to arms across the world to protest the religious organizations. Anonymous made

Project Chanology by hacking into several websites and private information that was owned and belonged to the church. Anonymous received enormous support and shortly afterwards there were “organized protests once a month in more than 100 cities around the globe starting February 10. Each city got their own separate forum, Facebook group, YouTube and IRC channel (Twitter wasn’t popular yet). The idea was to inform on and utilize as many platforms as possible.” (Eordogh). This movement blew the lid off the mystique of the religion and exposed the rotten core of the organization. The operation has since inspired many within the globe to fight back against the corruption and bizarre behavior of the church and its members. It allowed the media to further investigate the secretive and in many cases immoral behavior of the religion by influencing many journalists, documentarians, protestors, and directors to find out more about the dark side of Scientology. It’s helped cultivate the public’s negative opinion of the religion. It was one of the first examples of hacktivism which helped introduce Anonymous to the global stage. This movement was a major success and put the organization onto the world stage, and it has since become an iconic part of the internet as well as a voice for activism everywhere.

The next big event that Anonymous was involved in was with the infamous hacker group called Lulzsec. Lulzsec was a hacker group that became prominent in 2011 by hacking and DDoS attacking several media companies like Fox, PBS, and even Sony. Lulzsec’s members were all part of Anonymous, however none knew the true identities of their fellow hackers. Lulzsec first started their hacking spree after Fox News called the rapper Common a vile individual. Common was highly regarded rapper in the eyes of 4chan, which is where the group operated and communicated from, and having Fox News insult him was too much for the members. They formed a group and proceeded to find a weakness in the Fox network’s website

“and used that to leak the profiles and names of 73,000 X Factor US contestants. "We don't like you very much. As such, we cordially invite you to kiss our hand-crafted crescent fresh asses," (Arthur). They then went on to create fake news headlines for PBS. However the most infamous action that the group did was attack the Sony PlayStation Network and revealing almost over 25 million user information and data. Many within the community, especially 4chan, were disgusted with this action as Lulzsec started bragging about all over the threads. They then started attacking game sites like Minecraft and League of Legends, revealing more personal user data. Lulzsec had become too arrogant and aggressive, in no part thanks to the group's leader Hector Xavier Monsegur. He proceeded to then attack an FBI ran website, in which he was eventually caught and given an ultimatum; prison or cooperate with the authorities in finding the other members. Monsegur proceeded to help authorities catch all but one of the members of the hacker group. The rest were either arrested or put under house arrest for specified years as well as paying hefty fines. Lulzsec had tainted the ideals and public persona of Anonymous to many. Many media sites didn't see the difference between the two originally so they blamed Anonymous for their actions. Members within the organization and community hailed the rogue hacker group as traitors and have done as much as they can to distance themselves from the infamous organization. Needless to say, the organization had serious PR problems that they had to fix and restore.

The next big event that pulled Anonymous back on the global stage was its' repeated run-ins with the Infamous Westboro Baptist Church. The group had to recreate the positive public opinion shared by many after the infamous escapades of Lulzsec. This church, which is based in Topeka, Kansas, is known for its homophobic rhetoric, racism, anti-Semitism, and picketing the funerals of soldiers and shooting victims. Anonymous has repeatedly asked them numerous

times to end the picketing of soldiers funerals, only to receive insults directed towards them. In 2013, Westboro Baptist Church proclaimed that the victims of the Sandy Hook Shooting deserved what they got and announced that they would protest their funerals. Anonymous hacked their website, released private information and then proceeded to empty one of the churches bank account and sent the money to LGBT communities. Anonymous then proceeded to hack into the church's main website and replace it with an image of Batman fighting a Shark. They held control of the website for over three days. This cyber-attack was met with overwhelming support from the internet, with many claiming it to be the most entertaining action Anonymous has ever done.

The next two recent events of Anonymous' global activity have been in both parts hacking and protesting. The first action was releasing the private information of the Chief of Police of Ferguson in regards to the Michael Brown shooting, Anonymous vowed revenge. In their pursuit of vengeance "associate of Anonymous tweeted photos of Belmar's family and the home address of a Ferguson police officer." (Rose). They also took to social media and inspired people to come to St. Louis and protest the shooting and support the Black Lives Matter marches. The second was in regards to Hong Kong's Law Enforcement officials "citing the treatment of protesters during Occupy Central as the main impetus for the attack." (Blum). Anonymous hacked into several Law Enforcement and government websites in retaliation, releasing private information of several officials, which is the same plan that they used during the Ferguson protests. While their intentions were good, many were not happy with them leaking the home addresses of individuals. The Ferguson Chief of Police's house was vandalized shortly after the information was leaked.

Anonymous' most recent events have given the organization a very positive reception by people over the world. In 2015 Anonymous declared war on the Islamist Extremist group ISIS, whose cyber-savvy recruiters were maintaining thousands of social media sites to recruit members for the armed movement. Anonymous allied themselves with the CIA and went to work as a conjoined effort taking down recruiting accounts and sites. Since 2015, "more than 1,500 Twitter and Facebook accounts have been taken off line since the hacktivists launched their fight against Isis supporters."(Saul). This action has been lauded by the online community, most notably 4chan and Reddit.

Anonymous is a collective group of individuals throughout the globe. As such, there will be an inordinarily large amount of different cultures and customs from each of its members. Interestingly enough, many within the organization hold true to many of the same political and social beliefs. On the global political spectrum Anonymous leans heavily to the left in many situations despite their annoyance to the world liberals. They support immigration, higher wages, same sex marriage, separation of church and state, free medical care, and social progress. However, despite having a left stance on most issues, the group identifies itself as mostly Anarchistic. This political philosophy is most commonly misinterpreted by many as a form of utter chaos, much like the ideals of the Joker from the film *Dark Knight*. In many cases this infamous ideal is misunderstood. Real anarchists strongly support democratic self-governance and oppose heavily strict, corrupt, and oppressive regimes and corporations. They strongly believe in the strength of the people and the ability to make their own decisions without any governmental interference. Anarchist's desire an efficient society that helps provide people with the ability to make the widest range of decisions and choices without restriction. This goes in tandem with many of the historical figures and cultures that Anonymous idealizes. Anonymous

has been called by many to be pirates, due to their support of torrenting and downloading media (whether it be games, movies, television shows, or music). Pirates existed on an anarchic democratic state where crew-members on ships acted individually without much restrain that is until the Captain (an elected official in most cases) decides to lay down the law or make important decisions. Anonymous idealizes the pirate way of governance and individuality. Another important historical figure that organization looks up to is the legendary Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was made famous by his involvement in the Gun-Powder Plot that took place on November 5th, 1605 in London. He was part of group of thirteen young Catholic men who tried to assassinate King James I for his intolerance towards the Catholics in his country. The plot was exposed early on and the members were captured. “Guy Fawkes, who was in the cellar of the parliament with the 36 barrels of gunpowder when the authorities stormed it in the early hours of November 5th, was caught, and executed.” (www.bonfirenight.net). Many considered this act against tyranny and the 5th of November has been celebrated ever since. Now this ties into Anonymous beliefs because they are incredibly anti-big government and are always fighting against oppressive regimes and actions. Alan Moore’s famous graphic novel *V for Vendetta* highlights the importance of Fawkes’s actions. This novel inspired the Guy Fawkes mask, since the main character “V” wears it in the story. The mask and the novel have been the biggest influence to Anonymous’ outfit and philosophy, hence why the organization adopted the mask as its public symbol.

Anonymous is an international network of collected activist and hacktivist individuals. A Hacktivist is a person who gains unauthorized access to computer files or networks in order to further social or political ends. Individuals hack, DDoS, and Doxing servers, websites, databases, and other private information of the people they are protesting. It’s a form of protest that helps

grant public knowledge of their individual or group's perceived wrong doing to curry favor with masses. It's also a form of aggression to make point towards their enemies that they make due on threats. In many cases it's illegal to do so but the anonymity of the members makes it hard to pinpoint the culprits.

Anonymous obviously differs from many organizations in several ways. One of the organizations most distinguishing characteristic is the organization of its hierarchy, or lack thereof. There are no leaders in this organization, only planners. They communicate within forums, boards, texts, calls, and messages. All of these methods help with planning and coordinating protests and events. However some of the hackers may have a small hierarchy structure where the most effective and experienced will help lead, coordinate, and put the operation into effect. The organization is an alliance between innumerable individuals online that help utilize their skills to changing socio-political landscapes. Thusly people are treated with equality and fairness for the most part. Its' all about working as a group to achieve a goal and to have mutual respect with everyone helps ease tension and boosts comradery amongst the participants.

Since Anonymous originated from the message-board 4chan, the organization values privacy and anonymity immensely. As previously stated above, the organization got its name from the anonymous accounts that users had on 4chan. People would post and communicate with each other with randomly generated numbered usernames. Each time someone posts. They receive a random id number, thus becoming anonymous. The group utilized this method to not only name their organization, but to use the website to coordinate actions, plans, attacks, and discussion all the while becoming virtually undetectable by their anonymous ids. The also group opposes internet censorship and control, and the majority of their actions target governments,

organizations, and corporations they accuse of censorship. They also oppose electronic colonialism as they feel like it restricts indigenous cultures. Anonymous is an incredibly diverse group so they like to make sure that every culture, gender, race, and religious denomination is represented fairly, humanely, and appropriately. They are also viewed very favorably to younger generations, most notably millennials. Many are young individuals who resonate strongly with a message of free information and basic human rights. Younger generations are able to acquire information much faster than others thanks to the adaptability of digital media. The more information they know the more they'll see situations more clearly and understand messages and motifs. The political idealism attracts many young individuals as well who are hoping to make their mark on the world.

Anonymous aims to use the power of all forms of media and technology to make a difference in the world. They do this to force world leaders to realize that the common man can have just as much power and influence as they do. They also use all forms of media to also recruit others to their cause and to open eyes to global corruption and brutal regimes. They see current technology and media as one of the best ways to protest and make an impact. They also see it as an excellent world to make the world a better place from their perspective. Technology is supposed to help bring in information equally to everyone, which is why they strongly oppose censorship in any form. They are also highly critical of several major news networks such as Fox News and MSNBC for having an ulterior bias in news and spinning stories. Their methods have certainly proven that digital media shape media and public opinions easily.

Anonymous is most famous for their hacking capabilities such as Doxing, DDoS and data retrieval. Doxing is when private information on an individual is researched then broadcasted online. This is what Anonymous is especially talented at, having gone so far as to release

information on government and corporate officials, including those within the Church of Scientology (which is infamous for its extreme secrecy measures). It's an effective tool to showcase the skills of the organization as well as show the opposing party that Anonymous' threats aren't idle. It's also an excellent way to gather information and use it not only blackmail organizations but expose them to the public. It's a dangerous tool that has negatively impacted almost every impacted party. DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks are when websites are rendered unavailable due to massive amounts of online traffic on the website. This cuts off people from visiting the site which can cause havoc with businesses and organizations. This method is a favorite amongst protesters and hacktivists for several reasons. First off is that it restrict the intended party from promoting their brand/message/ideal to others. It cuts off the voice of the attacked party, which is also a major sign of weakness to rivals and to the public. It also ensures that the protesting party's intentions are seen as legitimate and not empty threat. It's a sign of resolve and measure with the protesters which can bring them to the negotiating table with the opposing party. Both of these methods though are highly illegal and most who are caught are arrested or heavily fined since its breaking privacy laws.

Another important piece in their methodology is their use of social and digital media. Anonymous is fluent in all forms of social and digital media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit and broadcasting. They utilize these platforms to push their message and ideals to the global public. They use sites like Facebook, Twitter, 4chan, and Reddit to communicate with their audience to inform them of global events and present and future projects. Information spreads across the Internet like wildfire, so utilizing some of the most visited websites, their information can reach the largest amount of audience in the quickest and most viral way possible. They are also able to communicate with protestors and fans more easily than other

platforms, thus leading to easier modes of global communication, seeing as it is an international organization. In regards to the YouTube and broadcasting, they are well versed in all forms of production elements whether it'll be a YouTube video, a podcast, radio broadcast and even live television segments and interviews. Many with the organization are younger and thusly are more adaptable to this style of production elements. They know how to record broadcasts and viral videos to alert the public of their current projects or exposing videos. It's an easy way to condense information so that the public will easily understand the situation and then join in the protests.

The final portion of Anonymous' methodology is how they organize protests. Anonymous protests are famous for the mass groups of individuals all wearing the Guy Fawkes masks to hide their identity and to create a unified front. Physical protests are usually mass gatherings of people hiding their identity to protest in front of buildings. Banners, signs, music, and jokes are all staples of a physical Anonymous protest. This is to create a sense of familiarity and bonding between protesters. The deeper the bond between protestors the stronger their resolve is to protest longer and louder. It's a mass gathering of likeminded people all unified as one under anonymity. It pulls to peoples baser instincts to band together. The same can be said with most of their digital protest and actions. People are unaware, most of the time, about who they're working with. All they know is that they all share the same goal and that helps with the morale and the resolve to make an impact. It's helped change the way protests are done. It's more personal which will attract people looking to make a difference as well as meet other people.

In regards to morality and best decisions, Anonymous isn't perfect. However the methods that they use have changed the way protests are done are almost there. They've changed the

socio-political global landscape because they've made easier to protest. Their methods allow for the privacy of individuals so they don't have to face the repercussion of doing something that while is legal, many would be upset for them actually doing it. The methods are also effective in getting results, however it depends on what the movement is about and how they go about it. The ideology behind the organization also strongly resonates with today's youth. They're tired of all the frustrating corruption, criminal activity, and lack of decency in the world. It's a cause that attracts not only youths but older generations as well. Regardless of opinions towards Anonymous, the organization has changed the way hacking and protesting is done, but also the way people communicate globally. The organization has brought millions together to serve a purpose together, which in itself is fascinating. They're interesting to see how they've helped shape international communications, and now it'll be more fascinating to see where they go now.

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