

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 2

Project Chanology—I Came for the Lulz but Stayed for the Outrage

Various contingencies converged to awaken the trickster-trolls from their unsavory 4chan underworld. But if we were to single out one event most responsible for this, it would be the leaking onto the Internet of a Scientology video featuring Tom Cruise, Scientology's celebrity of celebrities. "Streisand was in full effect," quipped one Anon. "The Streisand Effect" is a well-known Internet phenomenon wherein an attempt to censor a piece of information has the inverse effect: more people want to see it in order to understand the motivation for the censorship, and thus it spreads much more widely than it would have if left alone. The phenomenon is named after Barbra Streisand's attempt in 2003 to bar, via a multimillion-dollar lawsuit, aerial photographs of her Malibu home from being published. The photographer was only trying to document coastal erosion. Before the lawsuit, the image of her home had been viewed online only six times, but after the case went public, more than 420,000 people visited the site. The Tom Cruise Scientology video was subject to a similar dynamic; its circulation was unstoppable.

In the video, Tom Cruise epitomizes Scientology's narcissistic worldview: "Being a Scientologist ... when you drive by an accident, it's not like anyone else," he says, chuckling

with self-satisfaction. "As you drive past you know you have to do something about it, because you know you're the only one that can really help." Internet geeks (along with almost everyone else) viewed the video as a pathetic (not to mention hilarious) attempt to bestow credibility on pseudoscience via celebrity. As Tom Cruise cackled to himself in the video, the Internet community cackled—albeit for very different reasons—with him.

The video initially reached the Internet not through the efforts of Anonymous, but through (fittingly enough) an anonymous leak. The video was originally slated to appear on NBC to coincide with the release of Tom Cruise's unauthorized biography, but at the last minute the network got cold feet. However, critics of Scientology worked swiftly to ensure that the video found its way onto the web. Former Scientologist Patty Moher, working alongside longtime critic Patricia Greenway, FedExed a copy to Mark Bunker, who uploaded a video and sent a link to investigative journalist Mark Ebner, who in turn sent it to other news sources. Gawker, Radar, and other sites picked it up on January 13, 2008, linking to a video Bunker had posted—he thought—with password protection. He was wrong. "I woke up a few hours later to discover that the one chapter that had Cruise's monologue was accidentally not set to 'private,'" he said later. "It had been viewed about 20,000 times while I slept and was downloaded and mirrored multiple times on multiple accounts by people who had read the Gawker and Radar stories and other coverage of the video."¹ YouTube subsequently removed Bunker's videos hosted on the channel "TomCruiseBook"—along with the entire channel—likely at the behest of a Scientology copyright notice.

On January 15, Gawker republished the video with a short, punchy description fit for millions of eyeballs: "Let me put it this way: if Tom Cruise jumping on Oprah's couch was an 8 on the scale of scary, this is a 10." The Religious Technology Center—the arm of Scientology dealing with matters of

intellectual property—took immediate action, threatening publishers with lawsuits if they did not remove the video. Gawker ended its article boldly: “it’s newsworthy; and we will not be removing it.”² The cat was out of the bag, Scientology was furious (and about to furiously unfurl lawsuits), and then all hell broke loose when the “hive,” as Anonymous was then often called, decided to get involved.

On January 15, at 7:37:37 pm, the gates of the underworld opened with a historic thread regarding Scientology-oriented activism:

File :1200443857152.jpg-(22 KB, 251x328, intro_scn.jpg)



□ Anonymous 01/15/08(Tue)19:37: 37
No.51051816

I think its time for /b/ to do something big.

People need to understand not to fuck with /b/, and talk about nothing for ten minutes, and expect people to give their money to an organization that makes absolutely no fucking sense.

I'm talking about “hacking” or “taking down” the official Scientology website.

It's time to use our resources to do something we believe is right.

It's time to do something big again, /b/.

Talk amongst one another, find a better place to plan it and then carry out what can and must be done.

It's time, /b/

Technically—and geeks make it a habit to geek out on technical specificities—a call-to-arms post came earlier on 4chan as well as on 711chan (apparently at 6:11 pm, I was told). Nevertheless, this seemed to be the post that spurred the largest number of trolls into action. While the general mood of the thread was one of (hyperbolic) confidence and exuberance,

others were understandably skeptical about taking on—much less taking down—this extraordinarily powerful organization. They were well aware that targeting the Church of Scientology might be (invoking Tom Cruise’s blockbuster movie series) “mission impossible”:

□ **Anonymous** 01/15/08(Tue)19:46:35 No 51052578

mission impossible

a random image board cannot take down a pseudo-religion with the backing of wealthy people and an army of lawyers.

even if every person who has ever browsed /b/ ONCE joined in on a mass invasion it would still amount to nothing.

plus if anyone got found out they would have 500 lawyers up their ass before they could ssay “litigation”

scientologists are famous for hounding critics.

□ **ad** 04/01/07(Fri)01:02:07 No.12345678

□ **Anonymous** 01/15/08(Tue)19:50:22 No.51052862

»[51052482](#)

»[51052578](#)

Then don't get involved if you don't think it's possible.

The next day, a prescient message on /b/ issued the rallying cry for all Anonymous-related anti-Scientology activities—gathered under the slogan “CHANOLOGY”—and outlined the events to come:

File : 1200523664764.jpg-(22 KB, 251x328, 120046751294.jpg)



□ Anonymous 01/16/08(Wed)17:47:44
No.51134054

On 15/1/08 war was beginning.

Scientology's site is already under heavy bombardment, it's loading quite slowly.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg, the first assault in many to follow. We're winning a minor victory, but without the united support of the chans, Scientology will brush off this attack - and it will be doomed to nothing more than an entry in ED.

4chan, answer the call! Join the legion against Scientology, help in its demise, in its long awaited doom! For decades this tyranny has existed, corrupting the minds of the weak- although hilarious, it's rather pathetic. We must destroy this evil, and replace it with a greater one - CHANOLOGY For when we are victorious, the chans will stand united in a new chapter of anonymous existence and batshit insanity, we will have begun our world take over. If we can destroy Scientology, we can destroy whatever we like! The world will be but our play thing.

Do the right thing, 4chan, become not just a part of this war, become an epic part of it. The largest of the chans, you hold the key of manpower, what the legion is in desperate need of.

FORWARD ANONYMOUS! UNITED, WE, THE LEGION ARE UNSTOPPABLE

tl;dr we're taking down Scientology, join up or gtfo.

No Scifags allowed in this thread.

<http://711chan.org/res/6541.html>

Faster than anyone could say “Hail Xenu” (Xenu being the dastardly, evil alien overlord of the galaxy, at least according to Scientology’s version of history), these trolls—followed by myself shortly thereafter—headed to the Partyvan IRC network (an Anon hangout) to watch the trolling festivities “explode.” Or, at least, that’s how a core participant described it in a lecture to one of my university classes:

The unified bulk of anonymous collaborated through massive chat rooms to engage in various forms of ultracoordinated motherfuckery. For very short periods of time between January 15th and the 23rd, Scientology websites were hacked and DDoS'ed to remove them from the Internet. The Dianetics telephone hotline was completely bombarded with prank calls. All-black pieces of paper were faxed to every fax number we could get our hands on. And the "secrets" of their religion were blasted all over the Internet. I also personally scanned my bare ass and faxed it to them. Because fuck them.

Watching this epic raid take shape in real time, it was easy for me to understand why the geeks and hackers making up the ranks of Anonymous targeted Scientology: it is their evil doppelgänger. I did not end up in this IRC channel by accident—I was already immersed in the cultural tensions between geeks/netizens and Scientologists. One year earlier, I had been living in Edmonton, one of Canada's coldest cities in (what felt like) the furthest reaches of North America, culling and collating material in the world-class Scientology archive assembled by Stephen Kent, a sociology professor at the University of Alberta. I was there to research an epic battle between geeks and the Church of Scientology that began in the early 1990s and spanned two decades, starting after the Church of Scientology targeted its critics, especially those who leaked secret scripture. Humorously dubbed "Internet vs. Scientology," the battle was waged both offline and online between netizens—wholly committed to free speech—and the Church of Scientology—wholly committed to stamping it out by using any means necessary (legal or illegal) to censor criticism and prevent leaked documents from circulating online. I had arrived with a cultural hypothesis: hackers and Scientology stand in a diametrically opposed relationship to each other. This is not only because they are different, but because they are so precisely different. They are mirror images of each other, the perfect foils.

Consider the central doctrine espoused by *Keeping Scientology Working*, a publication of the Church's Religious Technology Center. The prose functions like a rusted first generation robot that has lurched into a corner and, finding itself unable to turn around, continues plodding forward while monotonously droning:

ONE: HAVING THE CORRECT TECHNOLOGY.

TWO: KNOWING THE TECHNOLOGY.

THREE: KNOWING IT IS CORRECT.

FOUR: TEACHING CORRECTLY THE CORRECT TECHNOLOGY.

FIVE: APPLYING THE TECHNOLOGY.

SIX: SEEING THAT THE TECHNOLOGY IS CORRECTLY APPLIED.

SEVEN: HAMMERING OUT THE EXISTENCE OF INCORRECT TECHNOLOGY.

EIGHT: KNOCKING OUT INCORRECT APPLICATIONS.

NINE: CLOSING THE DOOR ON ANY POSSIBILITY OF INCORRECT TECHNOLOGY.

TEN: CLOSING THE DOOR ON INCORRECT APPLICATION.

Reading these maxims in 2007, I knew that any hacker or geek who laid eyes on them would be simultaneously entertained *and* offended. Where Scientology is shrouded in secrecy, steeped in dogma, and dependent on the deployment of (pseudo)science and (faux) technology to control people, hacking lives in the light of inquisitive tinkering and exploration enables, and is enabled by, science and technology. Hackers dedicate their lives and pour their souls into creating and programming the world's most sophisticated machines. They are quintessential craftsman—motivated by a desire for excellence—but they abhor the idea of a single “correct technology.” In fact, hacking is where craft and craftiness intermingle: make a 3-D printer

that prints a 3-D printer; assemble an army of zombie computers into a botnet and then steal another hacker's botnet to make yours more powerful; design a robot solely for the purposes of mixing cocktails and showcase it at Roboexotica, a festival for cocktail robotics held since 1999; invent a programming language called Brainfuck designed to, well, mess with the heads of anyone who tries to program with it. You get the picture.

A religion which claims a privileged access to science and technology, to the extent of declaring themselves "the only group on Earth that has a workable technology which handles the basic rules of life itself and brings order out of chaos,"³ is deeply offensive to hackers whose only demand on technology is that it should, at minimum, actually *do something*—a task they leave not to some transcendent discovery of truth but, instead, to their personal ingenuity in discovering solutions to technical problems, with the help of shared tips, swapped ideas, and reams of borrowed code.

So it made a lot of sense that Anonymous, composed of geeks and hackers, would rise against Scientology. But something was unclear: was Anonymous simply trolling for its own lulzy amusement or was it earnestly protesting? Even if I was pretty certain these were not deliberate acts of activism, a political spirit was clearly wafting through IRC. People were undeniably, and royally, pissed off that Scientology dared to censor a video on "their" Internet—especially such a hilarious one. Anons were phone-pranking the Dianetics hotline and sending scores of unpaid pizza to Church centers, sharing their exploits in real time across 4chan. At first any political aim seemed incidental. And then, weeks later, one particular act of "ultracoordinated motherfuckery" gave way to an earnest—though still, undoubtedly, irreverent—activist endeavor.

As Chanology grew in popularity, its bustling IRC channels #xenu and #target became unsuitable working environments for the publicity stunts and outreach to which it aspired.

Three people broke away and started an IRC channel #press. Soon after, it grew to include eight members who worked one evening until daybreak to create what still qualifies as Anonymous's best-known work of art. (Eventually, the team grew in size, #press became chaotic and members split off yet again. They called themselves marblecake, after one of their own found inspiration in the baked item he was eating.)

If the Tom Cruise video struck a chord both humorous and hyperbolic, this team harmonized to create an ironic video whose tone embodied a trickster-like ambiguity: simultaneously hilarious and serious, playful and ominous. Much to everyone's surprise, the video catapulted Anonymous onto a new plane of existence.

In the video, a drab corporate glass building stands against a backdrop of ominously racing dark clouds. A speech begins which, while delivered by a robotic voice, is poetic and inspirational:

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.

We recognize you as a serious opponent, and do not expect our campaign to be completed in a short time frame. However, you will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic. Your choice of methods, your hypocrisy, and the general lawlessness of your organization have sounded its death knell. You have nowhere to hide, because we are everywhere. You have no recourse in attack, because for each of us that falls, ten more will take his place.

We are cognizant of the many who may decry our methods as parallel to those of the Church of Scientology, those who espouse the obvious truth that your organization will use the actions of Anonymous as an example of the persecution of which you have, for so long, warned your followers—this is acceptable to Anonymous. In fact, it is encouraged.

It was earnest—but earnestly a joke. This poetic imagery of a rising-up was rhetoric—but it was so compelling, so enticing as a lulzy direction, that it entrapped the Anonymous trolls into a commitment to the systematic dismantling of Scientology. They got caught up—like so many tricksters before them—in their own trickster trap. Anonymous, in its sudden commitment to a lulzy politics, gave birth to the reviled “moralfags” and “leaderfags.” These Anons—tainted, somehow, by an accidental taste for justice—effectively catalyzed one of the most potent protest movements of our times.

The accidental train of events went like this: The video unexpectedly sparked a debate as to whether Anons should hit the streets to protest the Church or remain faithful to their madcap roots in raids and lulz. The timing helped make the decision for them, tipping things in favor of street demonstrations. Gregg Housh, one of the video’s editors and an original member of marblecake, explained it as follows during an interview: “There were people who didn’t think anonymous or 4chan should take to the streets but the consensus to actually do it came relatively easily for us after the video. It seemed to be great timing, the right video at the right moment.”

Even if Anons were leaning toward protest, they did not want to ditch trolling completely; rather, they wanted to expand their repertoire. One Anon on IRC captured the full spectrum—legal, illegal, lulzy, serious—that these hordes of trolls were increasingly inhabiting (or wanting to inhabit) between mid-January 2008 and the first street protest (her pseudonym has been changed):

<Lulamania>: The ultimate scenario: Anonymous prank call + DDoS, US and French Government renew fraud charges, tax evasions, and illegal activities charges, local Church pastors telling their congregation the evils of Scientology, former members and families interviewed on TV about experience, activist groups holding licensed rallies and protests, and the news covering all of the above ...

<Lulamania>: Keep in mind this is a war of attrition. We cannot

bankrupt Scientology directly—this is about getting media attention, informing the public, wearing down their members, pissing off their IT/phone services, counter-brainwashing their potential recruits, and for lulz.

On January 24, 2008, Anonymous announced that February 10 would be a day of protest. A few days after this initial call to action, Scientology critic Mark Bunker seized the high octane moment to push for the use of legal tactics alone. Like the trickster of communication and crossroads, Eshu, he reached out to the trolls in a video (holy Xenu!), praised them (smart), and asked them to join the cause (holy Xenu!). His message was to simmer the hell down, rein in the lulz, and please, *please* refrain from anything straight-up illegal. On a lengthy post to a forum on whyweprotest.net, Bunker explained what motivated him to make the video: “After seeing Anonymous’s ‘Message to Scientology’ I was worried that I had helped to spawn attacks that would potentially scare Scientology staffers and also get Anonymous members in legal trouble so I decided I needed to make my initial tape to Anonymous.”⁴

Although many had already been thinking along these lines, not everyone was on board with the vision offered by this hefty, bear-like man in his fifties whom Anonymous renamed “Wise Beard Man” for his erudite posturing and white facial hair. (Only a few years later, new activist networks would arise that embraced militant, illegal digital tactics like the DDoS, not for trolling but for political dissent.) Nevertheless, enough of them shifted gears and darted down the path of activism; Bunker’s arguments nudged Anonymous toward the use of (mostly) legal tactics for its first major demonstrations.

The cake of marble, beavering away largely in secret (a cohort of outsiders knew of its existence), was aware that the great majority of potential participants were likely protest neophytes. If these Internet nerds, geeks, hackers, and trolls showed up *en masse* to protest without any prior activist experience, it would almost certainly be a recipe for ruin. So

they had to get them up to speed—and rather quickly. They delivered a crash course on the mechanics, challenges, and components of peaceful protest in a video called “Code of Conduct.”⁵ Posted on February 1, 2008, a robotic voice lists twenty-two rules. No detail is overlooked: the video reminds participants to wear comfortable shoes, drink plenty of water, keep particularly geeky and objectionable Internet jokes to themselves (because these would likely offend bystanders), refrain from any violence, obtain necessary permits, use catchy slogans, and record the event. Since marblecake knew that Scientologists would use all available means—including high-definition photos—to identify and subsequently harass protesters, one rule exhorted participants to cover their faces, but noted, in a statement that now appears ironic, that there was no need to use masks: “Rule #17: Cover your face. This will prevent your identification from videos taken by hostiles, other protesters, or security. Use scarves, hats, and sunglasses. Masks are not necessary, and donning them in the context of a public demonstration is forbidden in some jurisdictions.”

Necessary or not, as thousands of Anons and supporters hit the streets in cities around the world, masks appeared everywhere. By then, the Guy Fawkes mask was a pop cultural icon thanks to the Hollywood blockbuster *V for Vendetta*. The movie portrays a lone anarchist’s fight against a dystopian, Orwellian state. The mask had also appeared previously on 4chan, worn by a beloved meme character with a penchant for failure—Epic Fail Guy. Well known, easy to purchase, and imbued with an undeniable symbolic energy—both on account of its history and its more recent iteration—the Guy Fawkes mask became the mask de jour to deter the prying eyes of Scientology. After, it would function as Anonymous’s signature icon.

The day’s events straddled the line between serious political protest and carnivalesque shenanigans. Why did so many people show up? During an informal chat, one long-time Anon and member of marblecake reasoned to me (correctly, I

think) that “hearing [about] the first reports of east Australian protests on February 10, 2008, really set things in motion ... Had those not materialized I figure the turnout elsewhere wouldn’t have been as important.” While much of the Western world slumbered, in Australia an estimated 550 to 850 protesters poured into the streets, conveying their numbers in real time to others in video clips and photos, setting off a domino effect felt across much of the Western world. In London the crowd swelled to six hundred, and this success was matched in North America, where protesters hit the streets in small cities across the heartland and in major metropolitan centers like Los Angeles, where a whopping one thousand people turned out.

Six months after a local Fox News station labeled Anonymous “the Internet Hate Machine,” they had legions of followers in the streets—not just geeks and hackers hammering at their keyboards—who were seizing on the group’s name, its ethic of anonymity, and assorted concomitant iconography. That evening, men and women in Guy Fawkes masks and black suits with signs announcing “We Are the Internet” could be seen on cable news shows around the world.

While this may have been the first time Anons demonstrated in large numbers in the streets, previous trolling campaigns had a quasi-activist flair. For instance, in 2007 Anonymous targeted right-wing radio personality Hal Turner, not only for lulz (and revenge) but also because he was a “racist.” Anonymous had first targeted him in 2006 with a series of prank phone calls and computer attacks that took down his website. Hal Turner countered by publishing the numbers of the prank callers, prompting Anonymous to hit hard at the heart of his radio empire, trolling and hacking the heck out of him. The following blog post, published by an Anonymous participant before the second round of raids, conveys the undeniable political sensibility compelling the action:

Those of you who spend any time around the troll pits of the internet, such as 4chan, 7chan, YTMND etc will undoubtedly know of this already, but its worth repeating.

Hal Turner is, in short a Nazi [*sic*]. A Nazi with his own radio show. Unfortunately for him, he also hasn't really got a mass following, except from the /b/tards and other various trolls, who decided to absolutely ruin his life online. As the Fox News below [*sic*] clip of him advocating the murder of a US judge shows, he isn't exactly someone to feel sorry for.⁶

Chanology differed from these previous raids in one crucial respect: it became a permanent fixture in the political landscape. In the weeks and months following the first street demonstrations, Chanology continued to protest Scientology's relentless legal and extralegal crackdown on critics and those who dared to disclose or circulate internal documents. As one protester explained to me during a street demonstration in Ireland: "Came for the lulz; stayed for great justice, epic win, and moar lulz." But why? How did such a chaotic ensemble organize themselves? And could the lulz still thrive when seeking justice?

Why (and How) We Protest

Every time I reflect on the constitution and perseverance of Chanology, it strikes me as a minor miracle in the annals of political resistance. To be sure, a subset of trolling (like the Hal Turner raids) struck a political chord, but the energy behind these early raids tended to dissipate after a few days or weeks. Chanology was sustained in an environment not exactly conducive to long-term deliberate political organizing; it behooves us to consider the social dynamics behind Chanology's success, especially in light of the many tensions—for instance, between lulz-driven action and moral goals—which bedeviled it from the start.

To begin with, the formation of a sustained political will was secured by the widespread media coverage of the February street demonstrations. From the first day, people in Guy Fawkes masks were all over the news. Hundreds of photos and dozens of homemade videos from local protests were shared through IRC and popular social media sites like Digg, Myspace, Yahoo! Groups, and LiveJournal. For many Anons, the external representations validated Project Chanology and Anonymous. This dynamic of success and amplification repeated many times in the organization's history.

Also significant were ulterior motives: while activism was a significant factor for many Anons (and the lulz were always enticing), many turned out for the rare opportunity to meet some of their Anonymous brethren. Some stayed, others returned to their dark corners of the Internet and contested this incipient political sensibility, sometimes deriding their peers as "moralfags" and redoubling their trolling—even targeting Chanology itself as a source of lulz. Take, for instance, the following proposal—a call to reclaim Anonymous from the moralfags in order to resurrect the Internet Hate Machine—proposed on Chanology's very active virtual town square, the web forum Enturbulation.org (which was eventually ported to WhyWeProtest):

Fellow brothers and sisters,

Six months ago we started on a jihad to ensure that our internets would be free of faggotry. A call to arms went out and we answered it as legion. Today, when looking back at our naïve efforts it is obvious that what is ours by right has been stolen from us.

Our name, our memes and our efforts have been hijacked by people who do not understand and do not realize that our strength came from being diverse, uncaring and unrelenting. While normally this would not be an issue those who have stayed in the trenches protecting our ideals are now at an impasse.

We need your help, I am bent on hand and foot [*sic*] asking that those that have left Project Chanology return and reclaim it. Bring back the lulz, bring back the hate machine, do not let some rather forceful detractors sway you.

We started this to ensure our internets were free from tyranny and while I agree there are fights ahead that maybe [*sic*] more important to this end, this is the first one. Where we mold the newfags into hardened trolls and ensure that when the man comes to claim what is rightfully free we are all well versed in ensuring that cannot happen.

Over the coming weeks you will see some old faces raid your channels, your boards, your IRCs to ensure that Anonymous retains what is ours. Reclaim Chanology once and for all, burn anything that opposes us to the ground.⁷

The binary between moralfags and “hardened” lulz-seekers was, and still is, less clear-cut than this post suggests. On the IRC channels dedicated to political organizing, a small but rather vocal minority offered technical aid for political gain while also insisting on lulzy action, including horrific forms of trolling. Among these trolls, a single individual, named CPU (not his real name), stood out. Widely considered a talented hacker, he freely offered technical advice. But he was also a fierce critic of the moralfags and would clamor for vicious forms of trolling. For instance: on March 16, 2008, CPU suggested the following on the IRC channel #internethatemachine, a chat room for criticizing the moralfags (all names have been changed):

<CPU>: Internethatemachine is for those sick of the moralfags and the lovefags am i rite lol?

<CPU>: We should just hit a random forum for the lulz. Anyone remember the emetophobia raids?

<CPU>: I'm searching for a forum lol.

<CPU>: oh lol <http://www.suicideforum.com/>

<CPU>: First person to push someone to the edge wins?

<CPU>: Who remembers happy tree friends? :p
<CPU>: We trashed the forums every day for about 2 weeks lol.
<CPU>: Emo-corner got owned in the end, hard but it took time.
<CPU>: Too many people attacking the same thig at once lol.
<CPU>: We took their forum off of them at least twice and added a deface page lol.
<CPU>: Or we could find an epilepsy forum and spam it with flashing gifs or something?
<XB>: <http://www.epilepsyforum.org.uk/>
<CPU>: gogoogogo
<CO>: Oh god...phpbb aswel? :D Oh so exploitable.
<CPU>: Change main page to one big flashing thing?
<CPU>: lol making an account now :D
<CPU>: If we can change the main page we use this <http://www.freetheflash.com/flash/epilepsy-test.php>

Whether CPU and the others on the channel went on to execute this campaign is unknown—but someone did. On March 22, 2012, trolls engaged in one of the most morally reprehensible and notorious attacks to date, invading an epilepsy forum and posting bright flashing images which induced seizures among some of the forum's members. Nearly every piece of reporting incorrectly attributed the attack to Anons fighting Scientology, which was not likely the case; various threads on different image boards blamed another notorious board infested with trolls: eBaum's world. Even if Chanology was not behind the attack, the raid left a dark stain on the name Anonymous, infuriating some members of Chanology.⁸

It must be noted that while the anti-Scientology crusaders were mortified by the epilepsy forum attack, these nascent moralfags did not altogether disavow deviance or the lulz—it is, after all, part of the fabric of their culture. Instead, Chanology dabbled in a kinder, gentler breed of lulz. For instance, New York City is home to an annual (and rather sizable) zombie flash mob, whereupon a thousand ghoulish, bloody, slow-moving, groaning bodies drag (or sometimes

rollerskate) themselves through the city streets. Chanology organizers in New York thought it might be lulzy if this zombie mob paraded in front of the Scientology Church on the day of Anonymous's monthly protest there. The zombie mob happily obliged. They sauntered down 46th Street in slow motion, yelling obscenities at the Church while the Chanology protesters rolfed and snickered at Scientology, obviously proud of the theatrical (and mostly G-rated) lulz they managed to stage.

But there is no better example of activist Anons' engagement of carnivalesque humor than Operation Slickpubes in January 2009, also orchestrated by the Chanology cell in New York. It consisted of a nearly naked person (he was partially covered by a veneer of smeared Vaseline and pubic hair) streaking through a Scientology Org. The aim of this over-the-top endeavor was not simply to antagonize and anger Church members through an act of defilement (though this was no doubt part of it), but also to revitalize what some participants saw as the flagging spirit of the lulz. The forces of Apollo had to be balanced, eternally, with a bit of Dionysian trickster revelry. Later, Chanology members wrote about the incident in a blog post on motherfuckery.org, a site designed to commemorate their roots:

What resulted in the following months could only be described as "lulz" and "u mad", as the record of the Slickpubes operation made its rounds throughout the world of Chanology, anonymous, and the higher ranks of Scientology. Those who thought Chanology was too tame rejoiced.⁹

Within this emerging politically oriented Anonymous, the lulz were often deployed, as in Operation Slickpubes, in a jocular, Dionysian form: risqué yet also risky. They worked by simultaneously making one laugh, making one cringe, and also offering a politics of subversion. But not without consequences. Indeed, in the case of Operation Slickpubes, the

greasy streaker was arrested for his antics. The incident also prompted the NYPD to begin secretly monitoring Anonymous (a necessary baptism for any new political group, and what better way to attract law enforcement than through pubic hair?).¹⁰ Wise Beard Man may have tamed the Anonymous trickster, but he did not fully eliminate its mischievous spirit.

Anonymous's willingness to wreak havoc in pursuit of lulz and free speech (and in opposition to the malfeasance and deception of Scientology) calls to mind the nineteenth-century European "social bandits" described by historian Eric Hobsbawm in his 1959 book *Primitive Rebels*. These bandits are members of mafias, secret societies, religious sects, urban mobs, and outlaw gangs; they are ultimately thugs, but, according to Hobsbawm, they nurture a faint revolutionary spirit: some of their plunder is typically redistributed to the poor who they further protect from bandits other than themselves. Hobsbawm defines the bandits as "pre-political" figures "who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world."¹¹ Anonymous has worked toward finding that language with remarkable celerity since it launched Project Chanology.

Such hijinks nevertheless contrast with Hobsbawm's moral narrative, whereby bandits can only become viable political actors by giving up their menacing tactics and buying into conventional forms of power. For Hobsbawm, the bandit is pitted against "the forces of the new society which he cannot understand. At most he can fight it and seek to destroy it." This explains why "the bandit is often destructive and savage beyond the range of his myth."¹² Today's digital bandits, however, understand the forces of creative destruction, consciously deploying them for political purposes.

The lulz retained a prominent seat, but not at the head of the table. Chanology was a far cry from a chaotic horde of loons. While working in the midst of an often miasmatic environment of drama, in-fighting, and competing groups, Chanology members developed a strong organization, with

core participants devoting extraordinary chunks of time to the endeavor. We can take, as a case study, the software behind the immensely popular web forum *Why We Protest*, largely written by a young French geek named Ravel. He described joining Chanology as a natural fit, given that he had “some mischievous years and strong affinities with both the hacker and freedom of speech cultures. When the call to action came I didn’t bat an eye and pretty much uttered ‘let’s do this.’”¹³ He made it his life project for the next six years and counting.

The project emerged from the creation of the #website IRC channel. Ravel (known as Sue) disliked the existing proposals and, in classic hacker style, started to code the software according to his own vision with the help of two other programmers. Due to his hard work he was tapped to become part of marblecake:

I was approached and became part of the (unduly) infamous marblecake collective ... To date it has been the most organized group I have collaborated with online. I wouldn’t exaggerate when saying the quorum of participants spent over 70 hours a week working on media projects, planning, PR, and brainstorming. It served both as think tank and production studio. Meetings were held near daily, assessments were made, notes kept and so forth.¹⁴

“What the dicks is marblecake?”:

First Challenges to the New Anonymous

With a sizeable portion of Anons now firmly committed to this politically engaged style of hacking (complete with a technical infrastructure of channels, monthly meet-ups at Chanology events, and an emergent range of memes and objects specific to activist-Anonymous, like Guy Fawkes masks), it was only a matter of time before this identity would fracture. Homeostasis

is not, exactly, the preferred state of Anonymous—certainly not before Chanology, and definitely not after.

Let's linger for a moment on Ravel's characterization of marblecake as "the most organized group I have collaborated with online." By all accounts, marblecake was extremely effective in creating propaganda, issuing press releases, brokering between city cells, and suggesting themes for monthly protests. Among other factors, many attributed its success to a skilled organizer who went by the name of darr. A peer described her to me as "resolute and fierce, kind and understanding"—qualities the Anon thought crucial to marblecake's accomplishments.

But then darr made the mistake of attempting to push through an unpopular proposal. For the May 2008 protest, marblecake suggested the theme "Operation Psychout," to air Scientology's human rights abuses in the field of psychiatry, which was "met with a lot of opposition," explained one active member to me. Soon after, marblecake hammered the final nail into its own coffin—at least in the form it existed at the time—by seeking to "railroad it through," which led to Chanology members "taking darr down," who was seen as a particularly vocal proponent. Or a "power-hungry wannabee leaderfag," as one Anon put it. Trolls, especially, went for the jugular, doxing her and spreading lies. She quit the project, never to be seen again.

Marblecake existed in a nebulous zone. When the eight members had splintered off in January 2008, they left a permanent notification on the chat channel #press: "Want access to where all the action is? Get your ass on SSL and don't be a faggot ; D—Topic set by darr on 16/02/2008." Those intrigued by this enticing message could ask an "oldfag" about it—someone around since the beginning—and be directed through the steps to set up encryption (SSL). They would also have to be prepared to clock a lot of long hours. In this way, marblecake grew to include twenty-five participants. Eventually, the topic message was replaced and growth stagnated—newcomers had no idea about its existence.

Three months after darr's outing, someone posted a message on Why We Protest: "What the dicks is marblecake?" The answer they received effectively informed a much larger swath of Anons about the semi-secret project. For many, it revealed for the first time that multiple factions had developed under the mantle of Chanology:

I'm in marblecake, and I've no interest in being a leaderfag.

I'm happy to answer questions.

The short story is, it is/was a small thinktank that produced media anonymously and secretly. The positive spin would be that it has "suffered from its own success"—it produces enough significant media that it desires to remain completely secret ... and producing enough media that the rest of Anonymous became aware—to varying degrees—that there is a secret cabal of anons trying to manipulate things behind the scenes.

The negative spin is ... that it's a secret cabal of anons trying to manipulate things behind the scenes. And there is a case to be made that they got a swelled head early. They produced the original "message to scientology" video (well before I got involved). They were also led by Darr, who pissed off the wrong people, has the wrong attitude, and generally didn't handle criticism well.

[...]

As far as factions go, there's marblecake, enturbmods, OCMB, and the #enturbation channers (in addition to each individual city's cell, and probably many others I don't know about). MC and entubmods have battled, #enturbation (specifically Tuesday and WB) have battled with marblecake. OCMB often has drama pour over into enturbation. #enturbation generally hates marblecake. It's all a bunch of stupid infighting, and many people have been involved with more than one of those groups. And nobody should feel "left out" for not being involved in any of 'em, 'cause they're all essentially janitors for the

real anons, the ones that are out in cities fltering and picketing.¹⁵

The ensuing thread was long and bitter. Some people were seething, including some members and ex-members of the cabal. After this brouhaha, marblecake foundered for a bit before undergoing what one Anon called “reformation.” Afterwards, they functioned with more transparency regarding their role as “choreographers,” to borrow the phrase used by Paolo Gerbaudo to describe a leadership style common throughout the global protest movements of 2011.¹⁶

Marblecake’s outing showed that a simple binary between leaders and followers failed to capture the complex organizational dynamics in a milieu so committed to decentralization. Anonymous is not a united front, but a hydra—comprising numerous different networks. Even within a single project there are working groups that are often at odds with one another—not to mention the civil wars between different nodes of Anonymous more generally. But even if Anons don’t always agree about what is being done under the auspices of Anonymous, they tend to respect the fact that anyone can assume the moniker. The mask, which has become its signature icon, functions as an eternal beacon, broadcasting the symbolic value of equality, even in the face of bitter divisions and inequalities. Of course, despite the lack of a stable hierarchy or a single point of control, some Anons are more active and influential than others—at least for limited periods. Anonymous abides by a particular strain of what geeks call “do-ocracy,” with motivated individuals (or those with free time) extending its networked architecture by contributing time, labor, and attention to existing endeavors or leaving others to start ones of their own, aligned better to their ideals and principles.

Whether a movement even fesses up to the existence of soft leaders is an important question. It relates to another issue plaguing many social movements: how does a social movement

maintain enough permeability that newcomers can join pre-existing groups, whose tendency is to become cliquish? Without overt recognition that leadership exists, a project can fall easily into the “tyranny of structurelessness”—a situation whereby the vocalizing of an ideology of decentralization works as a platitude that obscures or redirects attention away from firmly entrenched but hidden nodes of power behind the scenes.¹⁷

Following the heated controversy that erupted on *Why We Protest*, many Anons came to accept that marblecake played a valuable organizational role. The group’s soft leadership engendered an impressive amount of organization—both online and in local cities. But the general consensus was in favor of more transparency.

“There is no way Scientology can win on us anymore. It is over.”

In 2014, Project Chanology is a shadow of its former self. Current monthly protests draw only the hardcore, with small to mid-sized turnouts in a smattering of cities (like Dublin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, and New York). However, this situation reflects not failure, but success. While Project Chanology did not demolish the Church, it altered the game so fundamentally that critics could now stand confidently under the sun without fear of reprisal. The Church no longer had the upper hand.

This point was driven home by numerous ex-Scientologists during a conference I attended called *Dublin Offlines*, organized by ex-Scientologists on June 30, 2012. It had been a little over four years since this unlikely elixir first fomented via a strange brew of ex-Church members, Scientology critics, and uppity Internet geeks. This occasion seemed an appropriate time and place for me to take stock of the project’s historical import.

The conference was held in Dublin's Teacher's Club (aka Club na Múinteoirí), housed in a four-story Georgian building which provided cozy and intimate shelter from the ever-present Irish drizzle. About seventy folks attended, a sizable chunk of them wearing Guy Fawkes masks. In keeping with the theatrics common to street demonstrations, some Anons from France were dressed with panache in circus and pantomime getups. Two were even dressed as giant leprechauns. My personal favorite was the guy sporting a cow suit.

Speakers included ex-Scientologists from the Scientology ship, some from the Sea Org, Gerry Armstrong (the former personal secretary to L. Ron Hubbard), Jamie DeWolf (the great-grandson of L. Ron Hubbard), a couple of academics (including myself), and a handful of individuals who had lost family to the Church. The master of ceremonies was Pete Griffiths, a local and a former executive director of the Kendal mission, in Cumbria, England; his shimmering silver suit perfectly matched his spirited personality.

Since I was staying on the other side town, I arrived a little late to find the talks already in full swing. I tiptoed in, silently waved to some of the locals I knew from a previous trip to Dublin, and slipped into a seat. I felt okay, if certainly under-caffeinated. But by the end of the day, having squirmed in discomfort during many of the talks, I was left emotionally drained. The ex-Scientologists provided moving personal accounts of the cult's power to strangle the lives of both those in the Church and those who dared to leave. Church policy mandates that new recruits sever ties with any family and friends who object (as many do); leaving the organization is often a logistical nightmare, since one's personal network has been so thoroughly eviscerated. If a member is public about his or her exit, the member is targeted under the "fair game policy," which states that the individual "[m]ay be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist without any discipline of the Scientologist. May be tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed."¹⁸

A talk by Tory Christman stood out among the rest. Before leaving on July 20, 2000, she had been a Scientologist for thirty-one years, during which period she honed her speaking skills by performing public relations for the church. Christman was confident, eloquent, inspirational, and witty; sporting rectangular glasses and a bright blue suit, she beamed with energy. She spoke for thirty minutes and packed in a whole lot: her entry into the Church, some of her less than pleasant experiences (such as the Church's attempt to discourage her use of epilepsy medicine), insight into the Church's mechanics of brainwashing ("It is a slow train of mind control," as she put it), and descriptions of the Church's theological tendencies delivered through pricey classes ("Keeping Scientology Working is on every single course"). As she was winding down, she described her harrowing escape ("[Scientology] chased me across the country") and highlighted the Church's greatest irony ("they are selling freedom but they enslave you").

She also duly acknowledged Anonymous's role: "Everyone now has the luxury [of being public] because, (A) the Internet; (B) critics even before Anonymous and; (C) Anonymous. Right? Which was totally a game changer. Forever. And it was and we all know this." She highlighted the bravery of an earlier generation of critics, a handful of whom were in attendance, who acted publicly when the number of defectors was low and Scientology held the power to shatter their lives by targeting critics aggressively and with impunity. "Anonymous would not be around if it were not for the critics before them," she said.

Her next statement reverberated in slow motion through the room and touched everyone personally: "There is no way Scientology can win on us anymore. It is over." For the ex-Scientists in the room, the words likely hit as a combination of relief and joy. The Anons, some whom had become close to ex-Scientists, likely felt the pride of political accomplishment wash over them. There is nothing, *nothing*, quite like the sweet taste of political victory, and Chanology

had accomplished the unlikely: the group successfully challenged an organization that seemed all-powerful, impervious to critique, and above the law.

More remarkable yet is that what started as a narrowly configured politics launched against a single foe broke out of that frame to encompass a fuller, diverse, thoroughly global political enterprise—a bonfire that burned hot and bright enough to spread across the globe, becoming Anonymous Everywhere. Let's now turn to the unlikely events that propelled Anonymous's surprising rise to prominence.