

Anonymous: peering behind the mask

Are members of the 'hacktivist group' Anonymous defenders of truth and seekers of knowledge, or simply a bunch of cyber terrorists? **Jana Herwig** investigates

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Researcher Jana Herwig dons the mask of Anonymous

When Anonymous first made big headlines in early 2008 with its protests against the Church of Scientology, dubbed Project Chanology, it was not yet apparent that Anonymous would be here to stay.

Three years later, Anonymous has not only gained a sizeable collection of adversaries and critics – including government agencies, IT security companies and digital rights advocacies who criticise its methods – it has also won scores of secret and not so secret admirers, especially among the highly social media literate, digital creative class.

The reputation of its members as defenders of truth and seekers of knowledge, digital avengers who cannot be lied to because they will hijack the emails of those who try,

seems to strike a chord with many.

What has remained unclear is just who or what Anonymous is. Popular descriptions used in the media are those as a protest movement, a hacker community, or – merging the two – as a hacktivist group. Apart from an interest in the actual individuals behind the handle, a focus has been on whether or not Anonymous has a leader or central command structure which oversees and steers its actions.

While Anonymous claims the contrary – and some reports from "inside Anonymous" characterise it as a "stamping herd" of wary individuals – this suspicion does not subside. In mid-March, Gawker announced to have received chat logs from Anonymous' "secret war room", and evidence of "certain members doling out tasks, selecting targets, and even dressing down members who get out of line".

What has received less attention in the media is where Anonymous came from and what it is outside of ongoing activities such as last year's Operation Payback, which targeted companies that had cancelled their service to Wikileaks, or the current Operation Sony, which began as a consumer rights protest until Sony suggested Anonymous might have been behind the PlayStation Network hack (Anonymous denies this).

But these operations, and the fluctuating number of individuals that engage in them at a time, are not identical with the collective identity of Anonymous, an identity that has been crafted in a collaborative effort and whose origins I am going to outline here.

Anonymous is anyone who knows the rules

This collective identity belongs to no one in particular, but is at the disposal of anyone who knows its rules and knows how to apply them. Anonymous, the collective identity, is older than Anonymous, the hacktivist group – more to the point, I propose that the hacktivist group can be understood as an application of Anonymous, the collective identity.

This identity originated on imageboard 4chan.org, as a byproduct of a user interface policy called forced anonymity, also known for short as "forced anon".

Forced anon made it impossible for users to type in their name when they published a forum post. Instead, "Anonymous" would invariably appear as the default author name for any post. As a result, and in particular for the uninitiated, discussions on 4chan would seem like an absurd soliloquy, with "Anonymous" posting a message and "Anonymous" and "Anonymous" responding.

What this interface policy prevented was the creation of a hierarchy among users, which

is known to quickly establish itself in online forums, with older forum members dominating and "newbies" having little weight in the discussion. Anonymous's (the group's) present dismissal of hierarchies and leadership has its roots in this practice. The uncertainty about who is talking (or probably just talking to him or herself, feigning conversation) is characteristic of the "forced anon" experience.

Fertile ground for collaboration

While users could not inscribe their individual identities, 4chan provided a fertile ground for a collaborative play with this collective identity, generating the rules for its rhetoric and its visual appearance. During Project Chanology, these rules and generated cultural meanings could first be witnessed in action by larger media audiences – eg, in the video [Message to Scientology](#), which popularised Anonymous's [biblical claim](#): "We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us."

Protesters in physical space wore Guy Fawkes masks in the style introduced by [V for Vendetta](#), which is now widely recognised as Anonymous's iconic look.

Anonymous's appearance with masks is not coincidental. The collective identity itself serves as a mask, allowing the bearer to do and say things that would otherwise be out of bounds.

Guests at a fancy-dress party are familiar with the phenomenon: the one who dresses up as Casanova develops a talent in charming the attendees that is otherwise unknown in him. In its excess and exaggeration, the carnivalesque is also rarely free from a critique of society. On 4chan, this critique manifests itself rather crudely as a relentless and often obscene mockery of virtually everything (as the purported '[Rules of the Internet](#)', No. 18, would have it: "Everything that can be labeled can be hated.").

With Anonymous, the hacktivist group, the critique is more politically refined, tackling in particular [internet](#) censorship and the suppression of information – although its backlog of activities also features interventions such as the [hacking](#) and manipulating of epilepsy support forums with flashing animations, potentially triggering a seizure in people with photosensitive epilepsy.

For those who have only become aware of Anonymous over the past half year, such an intervention might seem out of character. These days, Anonymous, the hacktivist group, seeks to emphasise its advocacy of digital rights and even its trustworthiness – eg, claiming in its [defence against Sony](#) that "Anonymous has never been known to have engaged in credit card theft".

But taking sides with the most noble cause has so far not been known as a priority of

Anonymous, the collective identity. While noble causes are not per se excluded, its motto – "We did it for the lulz" (read: for our enjoyment) – potentially overrides all other causes. A frequently circulated motivational poster by Anonymous warns us: "Anonymous. Because none of us are as cruel as all of us."

Anonymous, the collective identity, not only has a carnivalesque edge; it also echoes traditional African mask societies whose many functions, as Elizabeth Allo Isechei puts it, include the "exercise of male power and various forms of social control, whether over the youthful initiates or those the maskers perceive as deviant".

It must be noted that it is the mask and the temporary position outside of the social order which bestows this power on the maskers, a power which does not extend to the regular life of the individuals and their unmasked identities.

Understanding the collective

If one understands Anonymous, the group, as a contemporary, post-adolescent mask society and Anonymous, the collective identity, as its mask, activities such as Operation Payback appear in a new light: they, too, can be read as an attempt to exert social control, in this case over the companies that dropped Wikileaks as a client, through punishing them with DDoS attacks.

To understand Anonymous as a collective identity, the crucial question to be asked is not who the individuals are that use the mask, but what it is that this mask allows them to do.

Unlike traditional mask societies, however, gaining access to Anonymous does not require initiation through "elders" or senior members of the group. Instead, a user's computer, web and programming skills are the decisive factor which he or she must bring or develop to be initiated.

To first accumulate knowledge about Anonymous's rules, a user must spend a considerable amount of time online – eg, on websites such as 4chan or Encyclopedia Dramatica – to become familiar with its language and understand its culture.

While this might be technically relatively easy for someone who works in the media or IT industries, spending a lot of time online will be comparably more difficult for, say, a teacher or sales clerk.

The details of an ongoing operation, however, are not discussed on these websites. To become an active member of the hacktivist group, users need to be able to enter IRC channels and, again, spend much time online to be able to follow the crowd if it moves

elsewhere.

Depending on their skills and allocatable time, some users will merely observe (including journalists – which also raises the question whether these have already become part of Anonymous or not). Others will take up more active roles within the operation.

Press releases will be written, posters designed, communication infrastructure set up. While it does not seem likely that all participants in an operation are "hackers", some activities will necessarily require the involvement of programmers and administrators.

This could indeed be one of the weak spots where Anonymous, the hacktivist group, risks betraying the promise of Anonymous, the collective identity. Certain skills might translate into a more important role within an operation, and as soon as infrastructure such as a website or IRC channel is set up more permanently, it might amount to actual control. The "civil war" said to have "broken out in the ranks of headless 'hacktivist' collective Anonymous" on 9 May 2011 was sparked off by this very issue: "There is a hierarchy. All the power, all the DDoS - it's in that [IRC] channel," an Anonymous splinter group declared after having stolen the IP addresses and passwords from two AnonOps network sites – not to destroy Anonymous, but to fight back the ongoing centralisation and reform it according to its promise.

The other weak spot is in Anonymous's dealings with the media: Anonymous's original notion of a leaderless, heterarchical organisation is antithetical to journalists' relentless demands for quotable references from spokespersons (nor does it help that seeing one name in the news might be appealing to some participants in an operation).

The media, on the other hand, have so far barely been able to reflect the distinction between members of an ongoing operation and the notion of Anonymous as a collective identity – which, awkwardly, makes everyone engaging with Anonymous a hacker in the public perception.

Anonymous, the collective identity, has not only by now become a part of internet lore, it is also already being used by people to nurture a resilient self who would stand up for his or her rights if necessary.

We can assume that hardly anyone of those toying with the idea of putting on Anonymous's mask is a hacker on the verge of committing a DDoS attack – the mask may be empowering, lending them for instance an apodictic rhetoric in the defense of their information rights which not everyone might be able to muster on his or her own. As a collective identity, Anonymous is also about the right of wearing a mask, to make use of a speaking position that would otherwise not be available, both online and in

physical space.

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