

# Our Weirdness is Free

*Gabriella Coleman*

This is a new version of a text originally published on January 13, 2012 in the fifteenth issue of *Triple Canopy, Negative Infinity*, with support from the Brown Foundation, Inc. of Houston, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and the New York Council for the Humanities. Triple Canopy is an editorial collective and online magazine based in New York City, Los Angeles, and Berlin.

Anonymous, which came into being on the online message board 4chan eight years ago, is by nature and intent difficult to define: a name employed by various groups of hackers, technologists, activists, human rights advocates, and geeks; a cluster of ideas and ideals adopted by these people and centered around the concept of anonymity; a banner for collective actions online and in the real world that have ranged from fearsome but trivial pranks to technological support for Arab revolutionaries. These actions are sometimes peaceful and legal, sometimes disruptive and illicit, often existing in a moral and legal gray area. Anonymous acts to advance political causes but also for sheer amusement.

The seemingly paradoxical nature of Anonymous has much to do with its origins on 4chan, a popular online image board that is widely perceived to be one of the most offensive quarters of the Internet and that has become immensely popular, iconic, and opprobrious since it launched in 2003.

Today, Anonymous is associated with an irreverent, insurgent brand of activist politics. Before 2008, however, the moniker was used almost exclusively to stage pranks—to “troll,” in Internet parlance, targeting people and organizations, desecrating reputations, and revealing humiliating information. But in the past few years Anonymous has adopted the strategy of trolling as part of somewhat straightforward protest campaigns. The question is: how and why has the anarchic “hate machine” been transformed into one of the most adroit and effective political operations of recent times?

Looking for insights into Anonymous’s surprising metamorphosis, I began an anthropological study of the group in 2008. That year Anonymous launched a trolling attack against the Church of Scientology, which within mere weeks came to include earnest street demonstrations organized using conventional activist strategies. Anonymous became even more widely known two years later as a result of Operation Payback, a distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) campaign that—in the name of free speech—paralyzed the websites of financial institutions refusing to transfer funds from donors to WikiLeaks. But even then, Anonymous was still generally misunderstood, described by news reports alternately as “online activists,” “global cyberwarriors,” and “cyber vigilantes.”

The nature of this confusion is not hard to understand. Beyond a foundational commitment to anonymity and the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program. Though Anonymous has increasingly devoted its energies to (and become known for) digital dissent and direct action around various “ops,” it has no definite trajectory. Sometimes coy and playful, sometimes macabre and sinister—often all at once—Anonymous is still animated by a collective will toward mischief—toward “lulz,” a plural bastardization of the acronym LOL (laugh out loud). Lulz represent an ethos as much as an objective. Even as Anonymous has distinguished itself from 4chan and from trolling for its own sake, the underlying character of the group—and the form of its politics—are still intimately connected to the raucous culture of online message boards.

### The Painted Smile

The spirit of lulz is not particular to Anonymous, the Internet, trolling, or our times. The Dadaists and Yuppies shared a similarly rowdy disposition, as did the Situationists and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers; more recently, the Yes Men have tightly fused pranksterism and activism, in one instance presenting a three-foot-long golden penis (“employee visualization appendage”) at a WTO textile-industry conference as a means of controlling workers, to the applause of the management-class crowd. These transgressions serve many purposes: upending the conventions—and highlighting the absurdities—of a political system within which substantive change no longer seems possible, and generating the kind of spectacles that elicit coverage from the mainstream media. But the aforementioned groups were conceived as radical political enterprises, with a limited purview and a vanguardist composition. What sets Anonymous apart is its fluid membership and organic political evolution, along with its combination of feral tricksterism and expert online organizing.

Which is to say Anonymous follows a logic all its own. Partly because of its maverick image and *lulzy* antics, the group has attracted considerable attention—Anonymous was recently named *Time*’s number four person of the year in the magazine’s “people’s choice” poll—and a tremendous number of adherents, or Anons. Of course, the group’s organizing principle—anonymity—makes it impossible to tell how many people are involved. Participation is fluid, and Anonymous includes hard-core hackers as well as people who contribute by editing videos, penning manifestos, or publicizing actions. Then there are myriad sympathizers who may not spend hours in chat rooms but will heed commands to join DDoS attacks and repost messages sent by Anonymous Twitter accounts, acting as both mercenary army and street team. Anonymous has developed a loose structure, with technical resources such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) being run and controlled by a handful of elites, but these elites have erected no formal barriers to participation, such as initiation guidelines or screening processes, and ethical norms tend to be established consensually and enforced by all.



Pedobear, the Internet meme which became popular through the image board 4chan

Political operations often come together haphazardly. Often lacking an overarching strategy, Anonymous operates tactically, along the lines proposed by the French Jesuit thinker Michel de Certeau. “Because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing,’”<sup>1</sup> he writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). “Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’ The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.”<sup>2</sup> This approach could easily devolve into unfocused operations that dissipate the group’s collective strength. But acting “on the wing” leverages Anonymous’s fluid structure, giving Anons an advantage, however temporary, over traditional institutions—corporations, states, political parties—that function according to unified plans. De Certeau pointedly distinguishes this as strategy, which “postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (...) can be managed.”<sup>3</sup> Anonymous is not bound to any such place, and therefore does not harbor what de Certeau calls “a Cartesian attitude.”

For example: One infamous attack against security firm HBGary gained steam only after hackers discovered, in the course of some retaliatory trolling, that multiple security companies were conspiring to undermine WikiLeaks and discredit its supporters. Because anyone can take the name—as many different, seemingly unrelated affiliations have done—operations can be intensified quickly after a weakness on the part of the target is discovered, or shut down immediately if trouble or internal controversy arises. And so Anonymous’s overall direction remains somewhat opaque even to those on the inside.

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), xix.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 36.

Nevertheless, Anonymous's activities, however disparate and paradoxical on their surface, have tapped into a deep disenchantment with the political status quo, without positing a utopian vision—or any overarching agenda—in response. Anonymous acts in a way that is irreverent, often destructive, occasionally vindictive, and generally disdainful of the law, but it also offers an object lesson in what Frankfurt School philosopher Ernst Bloch calls “the principle of hope.” In his three-volume work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1938–47), Bloch attends to a stunningly diverse number of signs, symbols, and artifacts from different historical eras, ranging from dreams to fairy tales, in order to remind us that the desire for a better world is always in our midst. Bloch works as a philosophical archaeologist, excavating forgotten messages in songs, poems, and rituals. They do not represent hope in the religious sense, or even utopia—there is no vision of transcending our institutions, much less history—but they do hold latent possibilities that in certain conditions can be activated and perhaps lead to new political realities. “The door that is at least half-open, when it appears to open onto pleasant objects, is marked hope,” Bloch writes.

The emergence of Anonymous from one of the seediest places on the Internet seems to me an enactment of Bloch's principle of hope. What started as a network of trolls has become, much of the time, a force for good in the world; what started as a reaction to the Church of Scientology has come to encompass free speech causes from Tunisia to Zuccotti Park. While Anonymous has not put forward any programmatic plan to topple institutions or change unjust laws, it has made evading them seem easy and desirable. To those donning the Guy Fawkes mask associated with Anonymous, this—and not the commercialized, “transparent” social networking of Facebook—is the promise of the Internet, and it entails trading individualism for collectivism.

### The Ways of the Mask

If one term embodies the paradoxical and contradictory character of Anonymous—which is now serious in action and frivolous by design; made up of committed activists and agents of mischief—it is *lulz*. These four letters denote the pleasures attained from generating and sharing jokes and memes such as LOLcats and the cartoon pedophile mascot Pedobear. But they also suggest how easily and casually trolls can violently undermine the sense of security enjoyed by carefree denizens of the “real world” by, for instance, ordering scores of unpaid pizzas to be delivered to a single address, or publishing one's phone number and private communications and credit-card numbers and hard drive contents and any other information one might think to be “personal” or secure. Perhaps most important, lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, our aesthetic sensibilities, the inviolability of the world as it is; trolls invalidate that world by gesturing

toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it—to pull the carpet from under us—whenever they feel the urge and without warning.

Nowhere is this sense of a world outside of, and formed in opposition to, the one most of us inhabit more palpable than on 4chan. Anonymity is essential to 4chan, too; one might call anonymity its ground rule, and the dominant aspect of the culture the board has created. While trolling has often been the purview of boastful, self-aggrandizing cliques—for instance, the Gay Niggers' Association of America and its ex-president, Weev—on 4chan trolling is largely crowd-sourced, and participants are strongly discouraged from identifying themselves, instead focusing on the collective pursuit of “epic wins.”

Anonymous began trolling the Church of Scientology in January 2008 in pursuit of such an epic win, impelled by Scientology's threats to sue websites that refused to take down the infamous internal recruitment video of Tom Cruise praising the church's efforts to “create new and better realities.”<sup>4</sup> Per the Barbra Streisand Effect (any attempt to censor information that has already been published only serves to draw more attention), the leaked video went viral. Though intended as serious and persuasive, legitimating Scientology through the power of Cruise's celebrity, Internet geeks (and most others) viewed the video as a pathetic (not to mention hilarious) attempt to bestow credibility on pseudoscience. Once the church deployed its lawyers, one participant told me, Anonymous switched from mischief to “ultra-coordinated motherfuckery”: DDoS attacks to jam Scientology websites, ordering unpaid pizzas to churches across North America, sending images of nude body parts to church fax machines, and relentless phone pranking, especially of the Dianetics hotline.

Anonymous's willingness to wreak havoc in pursuit of lulz, but also in defense of free speech and in opposition to the malfeasances and deceptions 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 faintly revolutionary spirit: often when they plunder they also redistribute goods to the poor, or offer them protection against other bandits. 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.”<sup>5</sup> Anonymous has worked toward finding that language with remarkable celerity since it launched Project Chanology. Soon after the DDoS attacks and pranks, Anonymous shifted tactics, disseminating incriminating facts about Scientology and forging bonds with an older generation of dissidents, highlighting the church's use of censorship and abuse of human rights. An extempore spout of trolling had thus given birth to an earnest activist endeavor. Anonymous had emerged from its online sanctuary and set to improve the world. According to Hobsbawm, this is a conventional path taken by bandits and revolutionaries

4. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFBZ\\_uAbxS0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFBZ_uAbxS0)

5. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 2.

alike. “The recognition that profound and fundamental changes take place in society does not depend on the belief that utopia is realizable,”<sup>6</sup> he writes.

Ironically, Anonymous’s transformation coincided with the publication of a video lampooning Scientology: *Message to Scientology*, which calls for a “systematic” dismantling of the church for “our own enjoyment.” The video, one of many urging people to take action against the church, provoked a discussion among Anons in IRC rooms about whether they should protest in earnest or remain faithful to Anonymous’s madcap roots.

And so on February 10, 2008, thousands of Anons and supporters hit the streets in cities around the world for a day of action against Scientology, with events straddling the line between serious political protest and carnivalesque shenanigans. Six months after being labeled “the Internet hate machine,” Anonymous had legions of followers in the real world—not just geeks and hackers hammering at their keyboards—who were seizing on the group’s name, on its ethic of anonymity and concomitant iconography. That evening, men in Guy Fawkes masks and black suits with signs announcing “We Are the Internet” could be seen on cable-news shows around the world. A common refrain at these protests, repeated to me by one demonstrator in Dublin: “At least our weirdness is free.”

For many Anons, the campaign validated work that had preceded Project Chanology: the organization of energies and antagonisms into a political form, through experimentation and practice. In the following weeks and months they continued to protest Scientology’s relentless legal and extralegal crack-down on its critics, especially those who dared to disclose or circulate internal documents (which the church refers to as “secret scriptures”). Other Anons simply returned to their corners of the Internet; many of them now contest Anonymous’s incipient political sensibility, deriding their peers as “moralfags”<sup>7</sup> on 4chan, preferring to troll middle school girls and trade pornography. But the moralfags have not disavowed deviance—it is, after all, part of the fabric of their culture. In 2009, for instance, a group of Anons executed Operation Slickpubes, in which a streaker slathered in Vaseline and pubic hair terrorized the New York City Scientology headquarters. Such hijinks contrast with the moral narrative implied by Hobsbawm, whereby bandits could only become viable political actors by giving up their menacing tactics and buying into the 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.”<sup>8</sup> This explains why “the bandit is often destructive and savage beyond the range of his myth.”<sup>9</sup> Today’s digital bandits, however, understand the forces of the new society and are adept at harnessing them as means of *creative* destruction.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. It is common on 4chan to use “fag” as a derisive, if not actually homophobic, suffix.

8. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, op. cit., 25.

9. Ibid.

It is not hard to understand why Scientology is an ideal target among the many geeks and hackers who make up the ranks of Anonymous. Scientology is a proprietary and secretive religion of pseudoscience, complete with a cultish idiom and customs, in thrall of fake technology (most prominently the e-meter) and “advanced technology,” the church’s term for its spiritual teachings. Scientology exists almost as a funhouse mirror inversion of the geek and hacker world, which is so heavily invested in the production and use of workable technology and the eradication of nonsense. Scientology is the evil doppelgänger of anonymous, geeky Internet culture. But would that desire to congregate under the same alias—what media theorist Marco Desiiris calls an “improper name”—be diminished by a less perfect enemy?

Apparently not—or, the perfect ally works just as well. Two years after Operation Chanology was launched, a different group of Anons initiated a second wave of Operation Payback, again without much foresight or planning. According to an Anonymous source, the enterprise was organized by AnonOps (a branch of Anonymous) on IRC, announced on a blog, publicized on 4chan and Twitter, and finally picked up by the mainstream media. Thanks to the political firestorm caused by the release of a cache of classified diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks, AnonOps was able to command an infantry of thousands (assisted by botnets) to paralyze the websites of PayPal and Mastercard by running a program called Low Orbit Ion Cannon. “Someone in the media noticed and within a few hours it went viral,” recalled one Anonymous participant who took part in the attack. “We were stunned and a little frightened, to be honest.”

By the end of January 2011, Anonymous seemed to be devoting itself entirely to activist campaigns, at the expense of mischief-making, and some Anons lamented the waning of the lulz, although many more were invigorated by their contributing to the historic toppling of dictatorial regimes in the Middle East. Prompted by the Tunisian government’s blocking of WikiLeaks, Anonymous announced OpTunisia on January 2, 2011; soon after, AnonOps embarked on a series of so-called freedom operations to support the Arab Spring. Anonymous attacked government websites but soon began acting more like a human rights advocacy group, enabling citizens to circumvent censors and evade electronic surveillance, and sending care packages with advice and security tools. Those packages included this urgent and humorless note clarifying the role of social media: “This is \*your\* revolution. It will neither be Twittered nor televised or IRC’ed. You \*must\* hit the streets or you \*will\* lose the fight.” Though many Anons were invigorated by contributing to the historic toppling of dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, for others there could be no clearer evidence of the ascendance of moralfags.

Then came Operation HBGary. In February, Aaron Barr, CEO of the HBGary security firm, claimed to have “pwned” Anonymous, discovering

10. A botnet is a collection of compromised computers, each of which is known as a ‘bot’, connected to the Internet.

**This domain has been seized by Anonymous under section #14 of the rules of the Internet.**

Greetings HBGary (a computer "security" company),

Your recent claims of "infiltrating" Anonymous amuse us, and so do your attempts at using Anonymous as a means to garner press attention for yourself. How's this for attention?

You brought this upon yourself. You've tried to bite at the Anonymous hand, and now the Anonymous hand is bitch-slapping you in the face. You expected a counter-attack in the form of a verbal brail (as you so eloquently put it in one of your private emails), but now you've received the full fury of Anonymous. We award you no points.

What you seem to have failed to realize is that, just because you have the title and general appearance of a "security" company, you're nothing compared to Anonymous. You have little to no security knowledge. Your business thrives off charging ridiculous prices for simple things like NMAPs, and you don't deserve praise or even recognition as security experts. And now you turn to Anonymous for fame and attention? You're a pathetic gathering of media-whoring money-grabbing sycophants who want to reel in business for your equally pathetic company.

Let us teach you a lesson you'll never forget: you don't mess with Anonymous. You especially don't mess with Anonymous simply because you want to jump on a trend for public attention, which Aaron Barr admitted to in the following email:

*"But its not about them...its about our audience having the right impression of our capability and the competency of our research. Anonymous will do what every they can to discredit that. and they have the mic so to speak because they ara on Al Jazeera, ABC, CNN, etc. I am going to keep up the debate because I think it is good business but I will be smart about my public responses."*

You've clearly overlooked something very obvious here: we are everyone and we are no one. If you swing a sword of malice into Anonymous' innards, we will simply engulf it. You cannot break us, you cannot harm us, even though you have clearly tried...

You think you've gathered full names and home addresses of the "higher-ups" of Anonymous? You haven't. You think Anonymous has a founder and various co-founders? False. You believe that you can sell the information you've found to the FBI? False. Now, why is this one false? We've seen your internal documents, all of them, and do you know what we did? We laughed. Most of the information you've "extracted" is publicly available via our IRC networks. The personal details of Anonymous "members" you think you've acquired are, quite simply, nonsense.

So why can't you sell this information to the FBI like you intended? Because we're going to give it to them for free. Your gloriously fallacious work can be a wonder for all to scour, as will all of your private emails (more than 66,000 beauties for the public to enjoy). Now as you're probably aware, Anonymous is quite serious when it comes to things like this, and usually we can elaborate gratuitously on our reasoning behind operations, but we will give you a simple explanation, because you seem like primitive people:

You have blindly charged into the Anonymous hive, a hive from which you've tried to steal honey. Did you think the bees would not defend it? Well here we are. You've angered the hive, and now you are being stung.

It would appear that security experts are not expertly secured.

We are Anonymous.  
We are legion.  
We do not forgive.  
We do not forget.  
Expect us - always.

the real identities of top operatives. In response, Anons commandeered Barr's Twitter account and used it to spew 140-character racial slurs while following the accounts of Justin Bieber, Gay Pride, and Hitler. They hacked HBGary servers and downloaded 70,000 emails and deleted files, wiped out Barr's iPhone and iPad, then published the company's data alongside Barr's private communications for good measure. Most remarkably, Anonymous unearthed a document entitled "The WikiLeaks Threat," which outlined how HBGary Federal (a subsidiary dealing with federal contracts) and other security companies might undermine WikiLeaks by submitting fake documents to the site. There was also evidence of plans to ruin the careers of WikiLeaks supporters, among them Salon.com writer Glenn Greenwald.

A small crew of AnonOps hackers had started with retaliatory trolling and had ended up exposing what seemed to be a conspiracy so damning that members of Congress called for an investigative committee to be established. Given that these were private firms, the evidence obtained by AnonOps could never have been procured through legal channels such as a Freedom of Information Act request. Previously, Anonymous rarely hacked to expose security flaws and access politically sensitive information, preferring to deface and disable websites. The success of Operation HBGary launched new wings of Anonymous composed of smaller, more exclusive hacker crews dedicated to exposing security vulnerabilities and generating massive disclosures of emails and documents, further aligning the hackers with the goals of WikiLeaks. Some Anons took issue with the collateral damage wrought by Operation HBGary, especially the excessive leaking of personal information. The necessarily clandestine nature of such hacks was also criticized by those who saw it as counter to the ethos of transparency. At the time, however, most Anons were thrilled: they had not become Human Rights Watch; the pursuit of a more "mature" agenda did not mean an end to lulz.

### Here Comes Nobody

Upending the life of a security executive, publishing reams of personal information and corporate communications obtained illegally, and broadcasting the whole affair on Twitter may seem anathema to traditional activists, who might rather urge citizens to call their local representatives. But such acts of lulzmaking are magnetic on two levels, producing spectacular, shocking, and humorous events and images that attract media attention while simultaneously binding together the collective and rejuvenating its spirit. This runs counter to the reductive arguments about whether or not online organizing can breed the conditions necessary for serious, effective activism (see Clay Shirky in the affirmative, Malcolm Gladwell in the negative); the pursuit of lulz, and the shared technology used to do so, are means of creating a common, participatory culture. (Of course, the pursuit of lulz is also an end in and of itself.) Anonymous is sustained—and at times enlarged—not only by the effective use of communication technologies but

*Opposite page*  
Screenshot of a message appearing on the web domain of HBGary after it was sized by Anonymous

by a culture that thrives on the tension between order and disorder, cool and hot, seriousness and lulz, anonymity and transparency.

Though Anonymous participants must cloak their identities and often conceal their actions, the group demands transparency from state and corporate actors. To Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, transparency means sharing personal information constantly; he has gone so far as to declare the death of privacy.<sup>11</sup> Anonymous offers a provocative antithesis to the logic of constant self-publication, the desire to attain recognition or fame. The ethos of Anonymous is in opposition to celebrity, with the group configured as *e pluribus unum*: one from many. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern what or whom lies behind the mask. In a world where we post the majority of our personal data online, and states and corporations wield invasive tools to collect and market the rest, there is something profoundly hopeful in Anonymous's effacement of the self (even if there is something deeply ironic and troubling about doxing (unveiling a persons identity, name, phone number, social security number) and hacking in order to make that point). The domain of Anonymous enables participants to practice a kind of individuality beyond what anthropologist David Graeber, building on the seminal work of C.B. MacPherson, identifies as "possessive individualism," defined as "those deeply internalized habits of thinking and feeling" whereby we view "everything around [us] primarily as actual or potential commercial property."<sup>12</sup>

While anonymity often functions as an unspoken ethical imperative—a default mode of operation—Anons have also explicitly theorized the sublimation of identity. For instance, while preparing an op-ed for the *Guardian* last winter, dozens of Anons contributed to a document outlining the power and limits of anonymity. "It is the nameless collective and the procedures by which it is governed, which in the end prevail over the necessarily biased and single-minded individual," one comment reads. "Yet, at the same time, the individual's ability to contribute to this communal process of the production of knowledge has never been greater."

Even as Anons collectively enforce a prohibition against seeking personal fame, they do not suppress individuality. Anonymous is not a united front, but a hydra, a rhizome, comprising numerous different networks and working groups that are often at odds with one another. Of course, despite the lack of stable hierarchy some Anons are more active and influential than others. Anonymous abides by a particular strain of meritocratic populism, with highly motivated individuals or groups extending its networked architecture by contributing time, labor, and attention to existing enterprises or by starting their own as they see fit.

This has all left the news media quite puzzled, especially as worldwide coverage has ballooned in the wake of Project Chanology, Operation HBGary, and

11. While in 2008 Zuckerberg avowed that privacy is "the vector around which Facebook operates," he now views Facebook's treatment of personal information in less reverent terms: "We decided that these would be the social norms now and we just went for it." Nevertheless, contradictorily, he maintains that Facebook is merely "updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are".

12. David Graeber, *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), 3.



Operation BART, launched against San Francisco's mass transit agency this summer after it shut down cellular service in train tunnels to disrupt a planned protest against police violence. Anonymous has become a paradox of the age of twenty-four-hour infotainment: a cause célèbre in opposition to celebrity. Very few Anons have come forward to reveal details about themselves, despite the solicitude of the media. At the same time, Anonymous has succeeded in spreading its message as widely as possible, through every media channel at its disposal—in contrast to criminal groups that seek to remain hidden at all costs. Anonymous manages to achieve spectacular visibility and individual invisibility at once. Even after studying Anonymous for years and recently getting to know some of the more active participants (if mostly only virtually), my impression of the group is one of faint figures lurking in the shadows.

TL;DR<sup>13</sup>

In June of last year, NATO published a report<sup>14</sup> entitled "Information and Information Security," which called for Anonymous to be infiltrated and dismantled. "Observers note that Anonymous is becoming more and more sophisticated and could potentially hack into sensitive government, military, and

13. Term used to explain something—usually a post—that's too long. †oo Long, Didn't Read.

14. <http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2443>

Screenshot of the website of the Bay Area Rapid Transit hacked by Anonymous as part of the Operation BART

corporate files,” the report reads. “Today, the ad hoc international group of hackers and activists is said to have thousands of operatives and has no set rules or membership.” In July, Anonymous hackers infiltrated NATO, just days after sixteen alleged Anons were arrested in the US, fourteen of them in connection with Operation Payback. (Scores of alleged Anons had previously been arrested in the UK, Spain, and Turkey.)

The impossibility of forming any comprehensive, consistent picture of Anonymous is precisely what makes the group so unsettling to governments. Anonymous has, until last summer’s arrests, effectively evaded state power. But even while eluding surveillance, Anonymous has worked to expose the collection and mining of personal information by governments and corporations—and in doing so deflated the notion that such a thing as “private information” exists, as opposed to information in the public sphere. This distinction is one of the foundations of the neoliberal state, the very means by which individuality is constituted—and tracked. Anonymous has made it clear that there’s no difference between what we imagine to be our private and public selves—between singular individuals and fragmented “dividuals,” in Gilles Deleuze’s terms; or, at least, Anonymous has revealed that the protection of information (which helps guarantee that difference) by a benevolent security apparatus is a myth. At the same time, Anonymous has put forward its own model—the practice of anonymity—for maintaining that very distinction, suggesting that citizens must be the guardians of their own individuality, or determine for themselves how and when it is reduced into data packets.

This message is inextricable from the platform Anonymous has established for thousands of individuals to collectively articulate dissent and to combat particular corporate and government actions, such as the passage of the controversial National Defense Authorization Act on New Year’s Eve. By unpredictably fusing conventional activism with transgression and tricksterism, Anonymous has captured the attention of an incredible variety of admirers and skeptics. And even while empowering individuals who take part in Anonymous campaigns, the network has steadfastly avoided any reformist agenda, always pointing to the disquieting fact that existing political channels so often are unlikely or unable to accommodate the demands and represent the needs of most people, no matter how clearly and correctly they are communicated.

Since last summer’s arrests Anonymous has dispersed, becoming even more decentralized, with participants relocating to obscure nodes and communicating through private IRC channels; even the AnonOps IRC network where I have spent so much time in the past year vanished for more than a month due to internal strife and a vigorous DDoS attack. But as Anons have burrowed deeper underground, the reach of their icons has increased, especially after Anonymous began acting as a crucial, though informal, public relations wing for Occupy Wall Street in the fall, generating videos and images and circulating information supporting the movement’s aims. (Many Anons have since become involved in various Occupy groups as organizers or by providing technology support.)

One of Occupy Wall Street’s most powerful gestures has been to position its radically democratic decision-making process, represented by the agora of the General Assembly, against the reining corporate kleptocracy. Though this brand of horizontalism has a rich history with many roots, there is a particularly strong resonance in the relationship between the formal structure and the political aspirations of Anonymous. And Anonymous is organized not only around a radical democratic (at times chaotic and anarchic) structure but also around the very concept of anonymity, here constituted as collectivity. The accumulation of too much power—especially in a single point in (virtual) space—and prestige is not only taboo but functionally very difficult. The lasting effect of Anonymous may have as much to do with facilitating alternative practices of sociality—upending the ideological divide between individualism and collectivism—as with attacks on monolithic banks and sleazy security firms. This is the nature of the threat posed by Anonymous, and it is aptly symbolized by the Guy Fawkes mask: a caricature of the face of a sixteenth-century failed British regicide and the namesake of a holiday marked by bonfires celebrating the preservation of the monarchy; used by a dystopian comic book and then Hollywood film as the visage of anarchist terrorism and now turned into an icon of resistance—everything and nothing at once.