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Case Study

Anonymous: The Group With One Too Many Agendas

The Internet was created less than a century ago and yet it holds more information than a person could comprehend in a century's time. New websites and articles and videos and pictures and other files are being created and uploaded every second from all around the world. The internet is not just for dumping tons of data constantly but can also be used for communication. People are socializing, business are holding conferences and hackers are discussing operations all at the same time, all on the internet. Internet has removed the need to communicate in person to such a high degree that the creation of the telegraph seems mediocre in comparison. People can become completely untraceable over the internet, an aspect of the internet that is both useful and problematic. However, how someone sees the internet is all based on perspective. When your goal is to promote social justice through illegal activities, being inconspicuous is ideal. And yet, things get difficult when this hidden nature is consistent with hundreds of people who are trying to work together. Anonymous is a bit like this. Anonymous is a group of hackers who, while at first just messed with people, have in recent years become a force that desires social justice through exposing hidden information and battling the idea of censorship in all forms. Anonymous truly came out of nowhere and this factor of being nowhere and everywhere simultaneously is both the group's largest asset and most apparent hindrance.

Anonymous has been active for more than a decade after starting in 2003 on 4chan, an imageboard website where users could post images anonymously. Anonymous has no official founders since the whole point of the group is to remain without identification. Peter Bright, a technology editor who works for Ars Technica and writes about programming, software

development and security, describes the group's admiration for personal censorship. The group has stayed consistent in this characteristic and are very serious about their anonymity, having taken serious action against those who have exposed or threatened to expose Anonymous members, like HBGary Financial CEO Aaron Barr (Bright). Because Anonymous is so serious about maintaining confidentiality, the process of becoming a "member" is both difficult and impossible at the same time. How can you be the member of something that does not exist?

Anonymous has no identifiable members so while someone may claim to be part of Anonymous, it is completely possible that they are not and the same is true for those who claim to not be affiliated with the group. Anonymous members, also known as "Anons," can be anyone from anywhere as people have acted under the "Anonymous" name from all scopes of the world, making the group a global force. Location is not the only disparity amongst Anons as many members are supposedly young people from the age range of young teenagers to adults.

Part of the reason Anonymous was not taken serious during its origins, besides their early shenanigans, was because most people presumed that the group consisted of young people with amateur computer skills, incapable of committing serious crimes or hacking any important or well-guarded systems. However, this changed with Anonymous' first major hack attack was against the church of scientology as members exposed videos made by the church of Scientology with famed actor Tom Cruise in them. Anonymous members also crashed the official website of the Church of Scientology while also exposing illegal activities that the church was committing under the title of religious activity (2). After this the group made national coverage from media outlets which covered the issue giving a lot of credit to Anonymous to make their presence known. The group was nowhere near done after this achievement but rather this was only the beginning of their major activities that would range from political actions to battling terrorism.

For a group that has so many members, whether just in support of anti-privacy activism or actual participants of cyber attacks in “AnonOps,” like Project Chanology for which they got famous, it is hard to believe that there is no leader. Aaron Barr and many other opponents of Anonymous have stated in the past that they have discovered the identity of higher-up members, something that seems contradictory in itself (Bright). Because while some members of the group have been active since its creation in 2003, there are also those who join Anonymous everyday and considering that both types of members are supposed to be unidentifiable, there is a high possibility of obtaining a false persona. If not even cybersecurity experts who work with the NSA can safely identify these so called “criminals,” then no one is safe (Bright).

While this may seem like something frightening to the common person, it may actually be relieving to recognize the true anonymity of this group, considering that the government functions in a very contrary system. While government employee identities are relatively open information to the public, their actions are often secretive and while this secrecy is justified, there are certainly instances where leaked information has shown a new side of the government that people should be aware of such as the notorious leaks about the NSA. And so, while Anonymous identities remain hidden, their actions and intentions are usually fairly straight forward and exposed for the public to assess, and usually be in favor of. This contrasting secrecy between government and Anonymous has been a major source of controversy for many years as people argue to justify both parties. However, Anonymous identity is not the only controversial aspect of the group.

Social justice is a movement towards promoting change in an aspect of society that is looked down upon by a majority of those who are considered part of a specific social spectrum. The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) is a contemporary example of a social justice

movement as the majority of the minority population believe that they are being treated unfairly by law enforcement officials who are meant to protect and serve the public. However, not all social justice intentions are supported by the general society. Anonymous, which in itself creates a small social order, has their own agenda which acts based on the interests of many people, all of whom have different opinions of social values. The lack of unanimity within Anonymous has led to many questionable actions from the group. For example, concerning the Black Lives Movement, Jason Murdock, a journalist for IBTimes with a focus on technology and cybersecurity explains how Anonymous has publicly supported the movement with their statements of establishing an official “day of solidarity,” expressing Anonymous support of the movement and their avid interest in punishing law enforcement systems that do nothing against the police brutality issue that stems from the lack of proper and sufficient training of local police forces across the United States (Murdock). Anonymous makes bold claims, however these claims are often backed up by swift and strong actions like immediately after the shooting of Alton Sterling by a Baton Rouge police officer, Anonymous took credit for leaking a “file of 50,000 allegedly stolen police records from the local station's database” (Murdock). The group has also called the public to action with a video they posted which described public events people could take part in in support of the cause. And so, while Anonymous’ stance on the Black Lives Matter movement seemed clear, there were also other Anonymous activity that makes the group’s beliefs mixed.

Anonymous has been around for a long time. In this time, the group has branched out and created sub-groups like AntiSec or Ghost Squad that usually consist of Anonymous members but often with slight or drastic changes in their values, opinions or objectives. One major difference between Anonymous and Ghost Squad for example is that Ghost Squad took credit for shutting

down the official Black Lives Matter website for two days in protest of their message (1). Ghost Squad supports the All Lives Matter movement which serves as a counter to the BLM movement by saying that not only minority lives should be emphasized but the lives of all people, including the police officers involved in the deaths of African Americans (1). The group justifies their claims by saying that “after attacking the KKK [because] I realised the individuals in the Black Lives Matter movement were acting no better – some even promote genocide of the Caucasian race. This will not be tolerated” (1). This action against the BLM movement is completely turned around from the beliefs of the original Anonymous entity even though both groups contain members from the original Anonymous group.

Also, even with benevolent intentions, someone can cause harm for others. Adrian Chen, a contributing editor for the New Inquiry who wrote an article for the Nation, discusses the dark side of Anonymous many people tend to ignore. While the main Anonymous collective supports the Black Lives Matter movement, as they expressed with their day of outcry, they failed to consider how this event “corresponded with a previously planned protest, the National Moment of Silence, spearheaded by black feminist blogger Feminista Jones” (5). Jones was angered with how Anonymous overshadowed her event which emphasized peace and calm collaboration in supporting the cause and yet everyone, especially the media, focused on Anonymous as if its label gave it any more credibility than an actual significant figure in the BLM movement (5).

Anonymous may have complications when it pertains to certain topics like social justice. However, social justice is a relative issue considering that people can have many different takes on the issue considering their personal bias or relation to someone or something involved. Taking the Black Lives Matter movement as an example, families of police officers will most

often feel the need to defend police officers while families of those killed by police officers will have reason to be against the police force.

However, in other types of issues, there are not so clear of sides. The most important instance of a one sided conflict Anonymous partook in would be the Steubenville rape case. David Kushner, a writer for the Rolling Stones who publishes content about the internet and social networks, discusses the case in more detail. In Steubenville, Ohio, a 16 year old girl was raped by two football players from her high school (3). What makes this case particularly alarming is that the students involved and even staff from the school tried to cover up the case, getting rid of any and all evidence while local police officers did little to nothing to uncover the truth about the case (3). Deric Lostutter, otherwise known as KYAnonymous, was contacted by previous rape victims and activists to uncover the truth that the town clearly did not want to expose, and from there the operation to uncover evidence and eventually find the rapists and staff guilty began (3). In a case like this where the only right answer is to bring rapists to justice, there is little capability of disapproval in the Anonymous cloud, which is why the case was quickly exposed and resolved due to the efforts of Anonymous. The Steubenville rape case operation clearly shows that Anonymous can work together effectively and bring justice to unjust systems that no one else could fix.

However, while Anonymous has been efficient in some cases, there are many more instances where this cooperation is not present, whether or not it is purposeful. David Kushner discusses the lack of support in the Anonymous as “anyone can proclaim themselves a member or declare an "operation" against a target. But getting others to give a shit is another story”, because objectives of each operation differ greatly so “for every Anon who spawns a successful Op against The Church of Scientology or the New York Stock Exchange, countless others watch

their YouTube manifestos disappear in a stream of grumpy cats” (3). And so, while a rape case may strike the interest to act of many members, there are also many other issues that are not addressed by the community that could most likely need the support. Because so many people can/do exist in the global force that is Anonymous, everyone has different agendas and getting people to care about one another’s agendas is a problem that the community cannot surpass at times.

Also, even if an operation resonates with many members, this does not imply that a successful result will come of it, especially as operations get more and more complicated. Recently, CNBC correspondent, Holly Ellyatt, reported how Anonymous declared war on the terrorist group ISIS after the recent terrorist attack in Paris which led to the deaths of over a hundred citizens (Ellyatt). And while Anonymous provided distinct instructions on how they would personally take on the ISIS threat, these plans seem to be causing complications as Russell Brandon, a writer for the Verge since 2012, discusses in his article. Brandon explains how Anonymous, who has been filtering through Twitter to find possible accounts correlated with ISIS, has been providing a lot of misinformation about who is involved with ISIS, including everything from accounts that have bashed ISIS accounts to simply accounts that are in Arabic (4). Brandon includes tweets from Anonymous members about their disapproval of how the operation is going and how some members are starting to distance themselves from the group entirely, such as one Anon account that explains how “after #OpISIS there have been too many fame whores. It's not about the follows or RTs. It's about the truth. Have some integrity” (4). While in the big mess of things ISIS accounts are being revealed and shut down, causing disruptions in the terrorist group’s plans, there is certainly a fair share of hatred being spread

against the wrong people, and to some degree, hatred and fear of Muslim people is being spread by trying to expose accounts simply for being in Arabic or showing Muslim faith.

Whoever started the operation against ISIS most likely did not want to spread hatred of the Muslim culture. And yet, when part of a group where even the most ignorant person with some hacking skills can join, it is unrealistic to expect such a major operation to go smoothly. It would not be impossible to believe that this operation may end soon as support and general interest in the topic will most likely wane with time. No one pays members to be active or to come to a solution, therefore it is up to a member's own interest and dedication that operations are completed. This is the curse of extensive operations considering that it is only human nature that we lose interest in even the most compelling causes without the right amount of incentive.

Anonymous clearly has the potential to be a voice for the people, to stop major criminals and to expose established systems who try to hide information from those who should know it. And yet, without a system of organization beyond a reputation attached to an alias, and without a reason to actually stick around and put in effort to accomplish something, it is very easy for Anonymous to just be an idealistic brand for the technological generation to claim as their hero. I believe that another part of the inefficient nature of the group comes from the "rewards" one gets for being a whistleblower, hacker or against the social norm in general. Deric Lostutter was the main figure in building support for the Steubenville rape case and without him, Anonymous may never have exposed the truth of this town or even challenged the Westboro Baptist Church (3). And while his efforts may seem valiant to a common person, the FBI did not think the same way as Lostutter will most likely receive a more severe punishment than those who were part of the rape or its cover up (3). A similar trend is apparent with the presumed life sentence for Edward Snowden, the notorious whistleblower who exposed the NSA's metadata collection back in

2013. While the NSA receives debate about possible punishment besides public uproar, Snowden's fate is sealed if he is ever to return to U.S. soil. Cases like these where the presumed "good guy" ends up in a worse position than the "bad guy" deters many activists from staying motivated to do the right thing, especially when hundreds of people all have their own definition of the right thing to do.

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