

Anonymous: A Social Movement

PhD Thesis

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Glossary of terms:	5
1.0 Introduction	6
2.0 Literature Review – Social Movements and Hacktivism	25
2.1 Collective Behaviour	26
2.2 Resource Mobilisation Theory	28
2.3 Political Process	31
2.4 New Social Movements	32
2.5 Proposal for Synthesis.....	34
2.5.1 Networks of Informal Interaction	35
2.5.2 Shared Beliefs and Solidarity	36
2.5.3 Collective Action on Conflictual Issues	38
2.5.4 Action which primarily occurs outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life	39
2.6 Institutions	49
2.7 Organisations	51
2.7.1 Neoclassical Theory of the Firm.....	51
2.7.2 Managerial Theories of the Firm.....	52
2.7.3 Behavioural Theories of the Firm.....	53
2.8 Networks.....	55
2.9 Hacking and Hacktivism	55
2.9.1 Original Hackers, the Hacker Ethic and Tinkerers.....	57
2.9.2 Second Wave Hackers: Microserfs and Open Source as a Response	64
2.9.3 Hacktivism and the Performance of Politics	66
2.9.4 Hacktivism and Grassroots Movements	69
2.9.5 A brief timeline of Anonymous Activity	78
3.0 Methods, Methodology and Ethics.....	84
3.1 Summary and Introduction to the Methodology.....	84
3.2 Methodology.....	86
3.3 Realist Ethnography	88
3.4 Ethnographic Observation	91
3.4.1 Online:.....	92
3.4.2 Offline.....	102
3.5 Analysis	103
3.6 Ethics	106

3.7 Anonymity and Confidentiality	115
4.0 The Million Mask March	117
4.1 Variance in protest form and content	122
4.2 The Changing Nature of the Million Mask March.....	134
5.0 Masks and Anonymity.....	141
5.1 Epic Fail Guy	142
5.2 Masks at the March	147
5.3 Masks and the police.	151
5.4 Solidarity, Political Weight and Anonymity	154
5.6 In conclusion: The Mask, Anonymity and Political Weight.....	164
6.0 Observation and Interviews.....	166
6.1 WhyWeProtest – Chanology, The Importance of Information and The Role of Lulz	167
6.2 AnonUK – What used to be and the Practical Side of Internet Activism	186
6.3 #AnonOps IRC channel, Transient Communities and Voltaic Conversation	190
7.0 Discussion.....	198
7.1 Networks of Informal interaction	201
7.2 Shared Beliefs and Solidarity	205
7.3 Collective Action on Conflictual Issues	216
7.4 Action which primarily occurs outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life	218
8.0 Conclusion.....	225
8.1 The case against Anonymous as an Identity.....	226
8.2 Anonymous are a Social Movement	227
8.3 Limitations of Social Movement Theories	230
8.4 The Importance of This Project and Further Study.....	231
9.0 Bibliography	233

Glossary of terms:

Anonymous	A global hacktivism movement which espouses anonymity, irreverent humour and freedom of information as its central tenets.
Anon	A colloquial term referring to individual members of the Anonymous movement
WhyWeProtest (WWP)	An Anonymous community devoted to protesting the church of scientology
AnonUK	A forum bringing together members of the Anonymous movement in the United Kingdom
IRC	Internet Relay Chat – an online application which facilitates communication via text
AnonOPs	A specific channel within Internet Relay Chat occupied by Anonymous members
The Million Mask March	A global protest by the hacktivist group Anonymous occurring yearly on November 5th
Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS_	A cyber-attack which uses a high number of sources to flood a victim's online services with enough spurious requests to disable it.

1.0 Introduction

Since 2008 the anarchic hacktivist collective known as Anonymous has been the public face of internet activism, conducting “*Operations*” aimed at some of the largest companies and governments on the planet, and they have done so without a recognisable hierarchy, without an identifiable leader and whilst being able to seemingly drum up thousands of supporters out of the ether who simply then melt into anonymous obscurity once the operation is completed. “*Hacktivism is root*” begins the definition of the phenomenon by the activist “metac0m” (2003: http://www.sindominio.net/metabolik/alephandria/txt/what_is_hacktivism_v2.pdf). The beginning of something or perhaps the foundations of an organism which might grow to be something much larger. Written in 2003, metac0m's definition referred to a different iteration of hacktivism to Anonymous, but the imagery is still potent: Anonymous is a sprawling mammoth of a phenomenon; difficult to define and even more difficult to pin down. Anonymous is an entity comprised of a great many actors who may not have ever met, and organisations comprised of individuals who do not know the identity of the person with whom they are collaborating – it is also the main subject of the following thesis, which will seek to investigate the following research questions:

- 1) Can we understand Anonymous to have its own distinctive collective identity?
- 2) If not, how can we understand such a nebulous and difficult to define entity?

Ultimately, this thesis will conclude that social movement theory will be the most appropriate paradigm through which to understand Anonymous – and, over the coming chapters, I hope to present enough evidence to support this argument.

The term “hacktivism” is a simple portmanteau of “hacking” and “activism”. The effect is to create a term which contains elements of both concepts, but which is different from both. The

story of the emergence of this phenomenon charts the convergence of the two concepts of hacking and activism, and is laid out in detail, at least until the book's publication in 2004, by Jordan and Taylor in *"Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?"* (2004). It is important to begin by charting theories of how hacktivism emerged simply because the phenomenon is so new, and its history appears to have profound effects upon its current formation.

Jordan and Taylor begin their story on the emergence of hacktivism in the early definitions of "hacking", far from the solely computational manipulations to which the term has grown to refer colloquially, the earliest forms of hacking involved an exploration of technology – a tinkering to improve and circumvent the limitations of objects. An example of such could be the "phonephreakers" who would attempt to break into and sometimes illicitly re-appropriate pay-phone technology. Sometimes the phreakers would attempt to circumvent the need to pay for a call, though other times they would initiate a hack simply to test the limits of their mastery over the system. An example being the hack carried out by the phonephreaker known as "Captain Crunch" who placed two phones on a table and after speaking into one line, seconds later, heard his voice in the other. This might seem simple, but Captain Crunch had successfully rerouted the phone call around the world free of charge. Sherry Turkle discusses the hack:

"Appreciating what made the call around the world a great hack is an exercise in hacker aesthetics. It has the quality of [a] magician's gesture: a truly surprising result produced with ridiculously simple means."

(Turkle, 1984:232)

Turkle states that it is of importance that Captain Crunch had not stumbled upon the hack; it was possible because of his *"impressive amount of expertise about the telephone system"* and so represented a "mastery" of that system. Finally, she emphasises that it is important that the

hack is carried out unofficially and at the expense of the system, because the hacker is a person who is outside of it and so not implicitly subject to the rules of the system.

Jordan and Taylor follow the emergence of hacktivism from the early days of phonephreakers and other “tinkerers” to their “co-option” by large corporations. The technical expertise of hackers proved to be a useful tool for large technology companies, so they were recruited in droves.

These new hackers, though they still represented a lot of the original hacker sub-culture, were dubbed “*microserfs*” in Douglas Coupland’s (1995) book of the same name (due to the software company Microsoft being one of the largest employers of such individuals). Writers such as Coupland (1995) and Andrew Ross (1991) show that this co-option was so successful that “corporate friendly” features of the hacker subculture had been harnessed by silicon capitalism. Ross states:

“...this hacker culture celebrates high productivity, maverick forms of creative work energy, and an obsessive identification with on-line endurance (and endorphin highs) - all qualities that are valorized by the entrepreneurial codes of silicon futurism.”

(ibid, 1991:90)

Some hackers saw this corporatisation of hacking as a taint, and disdained the bloated nature of corporate software, instead seeking to create freely available and effective programs which were unburdened by the various requirements of corporate culture. This movement towards “free” software was known as the “open source” movement – with the invention of Linux as a rival operating system to Microsoft’s Windows being of key importance (Moody, 2001).

Finally, Jordan and Taylor describe hacktivism itself as emerging from the idea that though the open-source movement is based upon some deeply held political ideals, these ideals are often embedded deep within code and can be difficult for an outsider to pick out and truly interpret. As a result, early hacktivists sought to make the politics of their digital ventures explicit and unavoidable. Jordan and Taylor write:

“What was occurring simultaneously was the rise of a grouping of hackers whose politics could never be ignored, overlooked or remain hidden in software code. It is the use of computers for direct actions that forms hacktivism as a distinct community within the hacking world.”

(ibid, 2004:16-17)

Hacktivism, then, is the political side of hacking made public. Like an operating system over the top of hacking, interpreting the complex code and presenting it in a way which makes it accessible for those without the dense technical expertise valued by original hacker culture.

It is important to establish the roots of hacktivism as Jordan and Taylor have, because the most recent iteration of the movement seems to reflect both the early “tinkerer” aesthetic as much as they represent the heavily politicised ethos as described in the final phase of Jordan and Taylor’s timeline. The quote with which I began this chapter is taken from the now the defunct website “theHacktivist.net”. This site now hosts only a single document – an essay written by the creator of the website and activist named “metac0m”, he describes hacktivism as:

*“Hacktivism is root. It is the use of one's collective or **individual ingenuity to circumvent limitations**, to hack clever solutions to complex problems using computer and Internet*

*technology. Hacktivism is a continually evolving and open process; its tactics and methodology are not static. In this sense no one owns hacktivism - it has no prophet, no gospel and no canonized literature. Hacktivism is a rhizomic, **open-source phenomenon**.*” (Emphasis added)

(metac0m, 2003:1)

This quote seems to contain elements of both the early and late stages of Jordan and Taylor’s timeline – from using “*collective or individual ingenuity to circumvent limitations*” through to the mention of hacktivism as an open-source phenomenon.

It is important to note that both Jordan and Taylor’s work and metac0m’s description are both now over a decade old. Whilst the analysis is still incredibly useful, there have been some significant developments in hacktivist communities since that time. In the intervening years since that time perhaps the most prominent face of hacktivism has become the pale visage of the protagonist from Alan Moore’s cult graphic novel “V for Vendetta” – the striking white Guy Fawkes mask – the current symbol of Anonymous.

Anonymous are an amorphous collective of hackers, geeks and activists which formed on the infamous imageboard 4chan.org. 4chan itself has gained notoriety for its often-risqué content since it allows users to post almost completely anonymously with little *observable* moderation (though it is important to note that there *is* moderation, particularly on boards which focus upon adult content, where certain universally defined illegal content such as child pornography can arise). Although users are given the option to populate the “[Name]” field, very few people use this feature and so almost all content posted to 4chan is posted anonymously, and users are often referred to as “anon” and the collective “Anonymous” (Phillips, 2012:497). In 2006, Fox News, alongside stock footage of an exploding van, described Anonymous and 4chan as “*The*

Internet Hate Machine” and stated that they are “*hackers on steroids*” (Fox News, 2007) due to the site's transgressive content and user base whom Fox News reporter Taryn Sauthoff described as antisocial and foul-mouthed (Phillips, 2012:494). Far from damaging the reputation of 4chan and Anonymous, Phillips describes this event as a “windfall”; with the traffic to 4chan being dramatically increased and Anonymous themselves inducting “*the internet hate machine*” and “*hackers on steroids*” into the collective lexicon – the footage of the exploding van was even co-opted and dubbed the “4chan party van” (ibid, 2012:500).

In the documentary “*We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*” (2012) Gabriella Coleman states:

“They are kind of the rude boys of hacktivism. There's a rude rough edge to them, which I think also is one reason why they garner so much love and hate from people too. They represent a certain sort of chaotic freedom.”

(Coleman, in Knapperberger, 2012)

Since their formation, Anonymous have been linked with high-profile hacks against large targets (Sony (King, 2011), Facebook (Hamburger, 2011), the American Federal Bank (Jauregui, 2013), several middle-eastern governments) in response to a varying array of political issues (internet free-speech, libertarianism, anti-racism, sexism and homophobia to name a few), but due to the complex nature of the movement, it is relatively difficult to pin down for analysis. Paramount amongst these concerns is a focus on a new and “radical” definition of freedom of information – one which argues that communication in any form should not be restricted and this statement carries with it the implicit argument for greater governmental and corporate transparency (Beyer, 2014). Beyer’s definition of the “radical”

form of freedom of information supported by Anonymous is reminiscent of Jordan and Taylor's typology of hacktivists: Jordan and Taylor (2004) set out a spectrum upon which hacktivist activities fall – at one end there are “*digitally correct hacktivists*” and at the other “*direct action hacktivists*”.

The digitally correct camp seeks to radicalise the early hacker idea that all information “wants” to be free, and the role of the hacktivist should be protecting cyberspaces where information can flow freely – regardless of its content.

In contrast, the “direct action” camp uses more disruptive activities to achieve their aims – such as conducting distributed denial of service attacks on servers to halt or at least hinder their function. Digitally correct hacktivists see these actions as counter-productive to the flow of information (ibid, 2012:4, 91).

Importantly, Jordan and Taylor recognise that individuals and groups are likely to fall between the two camps, and as such they are more useful as a tool for comparison rather than directly correlating to everyday life. Various Anonymous-related groups seem to fall at different points along the spectrum between the two camps – Gabriella Coleman is one of the few writers to acknowledge the breadth of the nature of Anonymous' hacktivism.

Coleman's work regarding Anonymous, amongst all current writers on the movement, is perhaps the most complete. Over several years, Coleman conducted a study observing the IRC chat channels through which much of the early Anonymous interaction occurred. Coleman states that the label “Anonymous” is often paradoxical in nature, and can be difficult to define as it is a name which is 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”

(Coleman, 2012)

She argues that though the moniker existed before 2008 (and, interestingly, the symbolic “V mask” was less of a figurehead for the group before this time – instead the symbol for Anonymous was a green figure in a smart suit whose face was replaced by a “no photo available” message (Phillips, 2012)), it was the group’s protests against the Church of Scientology at this time which propelled it into the news media. In early 2008, the Church of Scientology’s began efforts to quell the proliferation of secret church documents on the whistleblowing site *WikiLeaks* and the leaking of an embarrassing video of actor and Scientologist Tom Cruise extolling the virtues of the church on news site *Gawker*. In response to what they saw as efforts to restrict freedom of information, groups of Anonymous hacktivists organised protests which included both street demonstrations and other more “trickster”-like activities such as ordering numerous unwanted pizzas to various Church of Scientology locations (Seabrook, 2008). Anonymous’ actions against the Church of Scientology were dubbed “Chanology” (an amalgam of the site of its genesis – 4chan – and the name of the Church). It was at these protests which the “V” mask began to emerge as a symbol for the movement – to protect their anonymity, anons wore plastic Guy Fawkes masks (mirroring the look of a character in a meme which was prevalent on 4chan at the time - “epic fail guy”). Coleman (2010) sees the two groups – Anonymous and Scientology - as diametrically opposed, the former as liberal, pro-technology and freedom of speech, the latter conservative, anti-technology, secretive and protective of information.

A year later the group gained even more attention due to the actions taken during “Operation Payback” a campaign which, in revenge for cutting off funding for Wikileaks, sought to cripple and paralyse the online assets of various financial institutions.

Traditional news media have struggled to appropriately represent Anonymous. Coleman argues that even after receiving worldwide attention following Operation Payback:

“Despite this notoriety and despite the fact that Anonymous had already coordinated protests against the Church of Scientology, commentators struggled to describe its ethics, sociology, and history using traditional analytical categories.”

(ibid, 2011)

and

“Anonymous was still generally misunderstood, described by news reports alternately as “online activists”, “global cyberwarriors” and “cyber vigilantes”

(ibid, 2012: 83)

A large part of the difficulty in understanding and definition lies in the fact that Anonymous is shrouded in a “*somewhat deliberate degree of mystery*” (2011). In “*Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action*” Coleman makes the point that the label “*Anonymous*” is a name which any individual or group is free to take and work under at their pleasure. Quinn Norton (2012), of Wired Magazine, likens this to a “*do-ocracy*” which is a term popular amongst the open-source movement:

“As the term implies, that means rule by sheer doing: Individuals propose actions, others join in (or not), and then the Anonymous flag is flown over the result. There’s no one to grant permission, no promise of praise or credit, so every action must be its own reward.”

(ibid, 2012).

Coleman expands upon this point, stating that the variety of individuals and groups who might take up this mantle is far wider than just conventional “hackers” – it can extend to “geeks” who possess some technological prowess but not necessarily to the level of the hackers (video editing, design skills, collaborative writing tools and the ability to access IRC (internet-relay chat)), and other participants who do not qualify as either geeks or hackers, but through participation in the digital domain, they begin to learn some of the cultural codes and other skills which might over time make them into “geeks” themselves (2011).

Reflecting Turkle’s writing regarding the “*outside the system*” nature of the hacker aesthetic, Stephen Murdoch (2010) recognises that it is part of the activist identity to oppose the status quo and sometimes this means engaging in activity which might be considered dangerous. Murdoch offers three different arguments which might be put forward to justify the potentially destructive actions of hacktivists such as Anonymous.

First, hacktivists often see the laws they are breaching to be an ill measurement of the ethical dimensions of their actions. The examples which Murdoch offers in this case are of Russian activists not respecting Georgian laws against the defacement of governmental websites, and the Chinese hacker group “the Human Flesh Search Engine” disregarding Chinese harassment law if they feel that the nature of their target justifies the harassment.

Second, the idea that the negative effect of the action is far outweighed by the positive effect – here Murdoch directly cites Anonymous’ protests against Scientology as inconveniencing

church members but anons likely believed that the greater goal of Chanology justified their actions.

Finally, there is the justification that the destructive act does not need justification at all because it is not a “bad act” in the first place. The example given here is of those who directly oppose modern materialist culture believing that property damage is not bad if no person is harmed. This one is perhaps most difficult to apply to Anonymous as they, of all people, know the value of digital assets (Murdoch, 2010).

Anonymous has no membership list, no officially recognised home website or twitter account for the entire movement. Whilst unofficial sites do exist, much of the day-to-day interaction between members occurs on discussion boards (Murdoch, 2010) such as those observed by Coleman (2010, 2012, 2014). They do not appear to be geographically limited, with various unofficial websites representing communities from across the globe and the “V” mask cropping up at protests as varied as the recent Ukraine/Russia protests and the Arab Spring, though several writers have found that distribution of and access to digital technology is not equally distributed across nations and so digital activism tends to differ depending upon the affluence of the nation.

They reject the idea of a leadership, with every member reportedly on equal standing to every other (Coleman, 2012). Chris Landers (2008) met and interviewed a few self-identified Anonymous members, they told him that they are the “...*first internet-based superconsciousness*” or simply “*we are the internet*” (Landers, 2008).



Figure 1: left - A masked protester at the "Euromaidan" protests in 2014 in the Ukraine. Central Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2014. (Sergei Grits/AP). Right – a masked protester in Turkey, picture credit to the BBC: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/06/130627_galeri_eylem_maske

It is important, though, that their ephemerality is not over-exaggerated. Coleman (2012) writes:

“By painting Anonymous as so inchoate we not only empirically misrepresent them; we drift inevitably into hyperbole, exaggerating the extent to which people find them threatening, adding to the air of mystery surrounding hackers who fly under that banner, feeding into the hysteria that law enforcement (and the defence contractors selling security and "anti-hacker solutions") self-consciously seek to cultivate.”

(Coleman, 2012)

It is, therefore, important that work such as Coleman's and this project be conducted. So that we might peel back the layers of theatricality and incorporeality which shroud Anonymous and understand the phenomenon better.

Before its “political birth” (Coleman, 2011) with the Chanology campaign – Anonymous was largely concerned with “trolling” through 4chan. Coleman describes trolling as involving, but not exclusive to, prankster like activities such as: *“telephone pranking, having many unpaid pizzas sent to the target’s home, DDoSing, and most especially, splattering personal*

information, preferably humiliating, all over the Internet” (Coleman, 2011). The motivation for these activities is in pursuit of the “*lulz*”: a pluralisation and bastardisation of the popular internet acronym “*lol*” (Laugh Out Loud). Lulz denote the pleasure of carrying out a successful troll; though it can also refer to light hearted amusement, funny images and other pranks.

Phillips (2012) details an example of one of Anonymous’ most impactful trolls. In September 2008 an unidentified anon posed as a paedophile on the Oprah Winfrey online message boards, writing an inflammatory message which was sure to garner attention. As intended, after being made aware of the post, Oprah Winfrey (who had spent the previous week lobbying for measures to reduce online predation) read the message aloud on her TV Show:

“Let me read you something posted on our message boards, from somebody who claims to be a member of a known paedophile network: He said he does not forgive. He does not forget. His group has over 9000 penises and they’re all . . . raping . . . children”

(“Oprah OVER 9000 PENISES”, 2008)

Phillips calls this a successful troll for several reasons: first, the targeting of this community with this issue is not insignificant. Sexual exploitation of children is one of the few taboos “*unaffected by political standpoint*” and the trolls would not have cared so much if it were not such a “hot button” topic for so many people. Due to the controversial nature of the subject, it presents itself as an extremely tempting weapon in the troll’s arsenal. Hence why it was particularly amusing to the participating trolls that the joke made it all the way to the massively popular Oprah Winfrey Show.

Second, the message itself was a successful “*subcultural Trojan Horse*” (ibid, 2012:504). In addition to citing a well-known Anonymous mantra “*we do not forgive, we do not forget*”. The phrase “Over 9000” is also a popular internet meme (derived from the children’s cartoon “Dragon Ball Z” – where in one episode, a protagonist upon “scanning” a powerful opponent discovers that his “*power level*” is “*over 9000!*” and crushes his scanning device in the process. The meme is generally employed when a person or group wants to emphasise or make light of either the relative power of an object or its numerousness). So simply by uttering the phrase “*over 9000 penises*” Oprah had marked the trolls’ territory. Indeed, if Oprah had said “*over 9000*” anything, anyone associated with 4chan or familiar with this relatively popular meme would have immediately known that this was a prank, and that Oprah was a little more than a pawn in the troll’s game (Phillips, 2012:504).

Phillips argues that the above troll demonstrates the parallels between trolls and corporate media. Though the two camps diverged significantly in that Oprah and her producers were courting a horrified yet sympathetic audience, and the trolls were only courting a horrified audience. Nonetheless, the goals of both camps were achieved in identical ways: both the trolls and the production team used emotionally loaded language to tug at the audience's heart strings and exploited a controversial human angle, and both had something to gain from their audience's distress (ibid, 2012:505). Phillips refers to the “*ideological shadow play*” which occurs between trolls and their targets, particularly when dealing with the mainstream media. The two camps are similar in that:

“Like corporate media outlets, trolls go where the stories are; like corporate media outlets, trolls revel in sensationalism and hyperbole.”

(Phillips, 2012:505)

Phillips references Kellner (2003) and posits that trolls and mainstream media are similar in that they are invested in *spectacle* – the process through which business and entertainment (fun) fuse (ibid, 2003:4). The definition of “business” differs between the two groups, but both groups are involved in the accrual of something – for media is the accrual of capital, for the trolls it is the accrual of lulz (lulz is often referred to as “serious business” or “srs bsns”). Both groups try to engage with an audience and garner their attention. In this way the relationship between trolls and the mainstream media is not diametric, rather they both engage in the same behaviour, but for different ends. Phillips (2012:506) warns against the assumption that because of the similarities, mainstream media should be referred to as trolls themselves – because trolling, and particularly when associated with 4chan and Anonymous, is predicated on an association with a subcultural identification. Again, this rings true to Turkle’s definition of the early hacker aesthetic of being “*outside the system*”.

Phillips concludes by drawing a parallel between trolling and Debord and Wolman's “*Detournement*” (1956) which is loosely defined as “*hijacking*” or “*rerouting*” - whereby cultural objects are reconstituted to give them a new subversive meaning. Trolls do not challenge the dominant culture; instead they attempt to embody it by exploiting the sensationalist imperative which is suffused throughout mainstream media and entertainment. Most significantly for Phillips, objects are *detoured* through the means of pointed mimicry in which the effect is to “*reinforce the meaning of the original element*” (Jappe, 1999:59) – so a cultural artefact is “*placed in oppositional context and subsequently ironized*” (Phillips, 2012:506) and, in effect, the object is allowed to indict itself through itself. Trolls troll Fox News by acting like Fox News and trolls troll The Oprah Winfrey Show by acting like The Oprah Winfrey Show – and the troll is successful when the target rails against their own reflection (ibid, 2012:506).

To some writers, Anonymous represent advancement in the efficacy of human action in the digital age. Legal scholar Yochai Benkler writes:

"Anonymous demonstrates one of the new core aspects of power in a networked, democratic society: Individuals are vastly more effective and less susceptible to manipulation, control, and suppression by traditional sources of power than they were even a decade ago,"

(Benkler, 2012)

According to Benkler, Anonymous achieve this through several actions, including leaking of private documentation: causing those in power to doubt the efficacy of the barriers they put in place to keep their actions secret – and by doing so they govern their own action as a result.

Others, Coleman (2012) notes, argue that the opposite is true – that the actions of hacktivist groups such as Anonymous merely give more fuel for those who seek to restrict anonymity online. In creating a situation in which states and corporations must react to the increasing threat of “cyber-terrorism”, these entities enact more and more stringent restrictions on the freedom afforded to netizens. Evgeny Morozov writes:

"Hacktivists keep supplying the industry with strong examples as to why more public money should be spent beefing up Internet security and surveillance while eliminating online anonymity."

(Morozov, 2012)

Though, in Anonymous' defence, Coleman argues that a strict surveillance state on the internet is already in place (rather than a spectre on the horizon) and was Anonymous to disappear or never to have existed the further restriction of internet freedom would likely continue unabated:

“It seems misplaced, even disingenuous, at this juncture, to blame Anonymous' actions for increasing the rate at which governments and security companies seek to control the internet, private data, and online freedoms.”

(Coleman, 2012)

The New Yorker columnist Malcom Gladwell, in his 2010 column *“Small Change: Why the Revolution won't be Tweeted”* stated that modern internet and social media-assisted activism, in contrast to certain American Race rights protests of the 1960s, is characterised by weak ties and low requirements for participation – and will therefore prove to be increasingly less effective. Gladwell argues that social media (Twitter, Facebook etc) build networks, as opposed to close kinship relationships:

“There are many things, though, that networks don't do well. Car companies sensibly use a network to organize their hundreds of suppliers, but not to design their cars.”

(Gladwell, 2010)

His argument is that whilst networks are good at canvassing shallow opinion and encouraging participation by “*lessening the level of motivation that participation requires*” the type of activism which a network engenders is significantly less effective and does not encourage the kind of devotion and dedication to the cause seen in his earlier examples. The term “slacktivism”, though originally coined as a positive descriptor as opposed to a negative one (Christensen, 2011), has grown to represent a compunction to engage in the political process but only by expelling the least amount of energy possible and would seem to apply here. Barbara Mikkelsen (co-creator of the popular website snopes2.com), quoted in the New York Times article “*They Weren't Careful What They Hoped For*” states: “*It's all fed by slacktivism... the desire people have to do something good without getting out of their chair*” (Feder, 2002). This statement would be supported by Earl and Schussman who identify the rise of “*e-activism*” as creating “*users*” rather than “*members*” as the rapid rise of internet technology has led to a decline in commitment due to the ease of opting in and out of different protest issues (Earl and Schussman, 2003).

However, in response to Earl and Schussman, Van Laer (2010) stated that whilst there were demographic differences between those activists who used the internet and those that did not in their study, those that did still seemed to display certain motivational elements which were facilitated by their online interactions – most notably a “group based anger” - and, in the end, this might have a positive effect on future commitment to protest causes and participation (Van Laer, 2010:413).

The chapter to this point, I hope, has served to demonstrate that there are elements of Anonymous which defy definition – or at the very least make definition a challenging task. Their ephemerality, their rejection of traditional hierarchical structures, their aversion to

individual identity and celebrity, the breadth of the demographic to which they appeal, and their intentionally mischievous nature ensure that definition remains difficult. So difficult, in fact, that many writers on the subject skip over the fundamental question of how you might define this entity and skip straight to the meatier questions of how it operates, who is involved in it and why they are involved. There is a need to continually examine our definitions of dynamic entities such as Anonymous: they are fast-paced, ever changing, evolving and adapting to new opportunities and restrictions – the Anonymous of 2008 is very different to the Anonymous of 2017 in both structure and action, and so is the arena in which they operate. The original question posed by this thesis was “*Can Hacktivism be Understood as the Performance of a Collective Digital Identity?*”, this is a question of definition more than anything, but it became clear very early in my data collection that the answer to that question is “*no, it cannot*” - I discovered that what people thought to be Anonymous was a phenomenon so much more varied than could be encompassed by the concept of a singular “collective identity”, so the question quickly became: “*Well, then how do we define them?*”. The answer to this new question, I believe, is as a “*social movement*” and during the following chapters I hope to demonstrate why I believe social movement is the most appropriate definition for Anonymous.

2.0 Literature Review – Social Movements and Hacktivism

This literature review will focus upon two main areas of literature: Social Movement theory and literature concerning hacker identities – by covering these two fields of literature I hope to give context to the rest of the project, and demonstrate that there is a gap in the literature which my project hopes to remedy; that is the question of whether collective identity is an appropriate concept to understand Anonymous, and the appropriateness of Social Movement theories at this task.

First, the literature concerning Social Movement theory will be addressed –I will set out the main theories which inform social movements as a concept, what features a phenomenon should present if it is to be thought of as a social movement and examples in literature of such. Second, the literature concerning hacker and hacktivist identities will be addressed; the main focus of this section will be on the hacktivist group Anonymous, on how writers have described the phenomenon, and their applicability to the concept of social movements, but we will also cover literature regarding the historical foundation upon which Anonymous a modern hacktivism is built. This chapter will seek to show how social movement theories can be applied to new phenomenon and how literature on contemporary hacktivist groups and, in particular, Anonymous has failed to address its relationship with social movement literature, a deficiency which this project will seek to fulfil.

This review of Social Movement literature will begin with the work conducted by Mario Diani in the paper “*The Concept of Social Movements*” (1992). This paper is a good place to start as Diani identifies an issue with most other work on social movements: that they move from the conceptual definition of what “Social Movements” as a phenomenon comprise and onto more substantive questions of how mobilisations come about, or the difference between “old and new” social movements before fully addressing the definition of social movements

themselves. He states that these analyses are clearly important, but that these same topics might reasonably be studied without ever mentioning social movements, instead using terms such as “social change” or “collective action”. This glossing-over of the conceptual question of the definition of social movements, Diani argues, might be attributed to the difficulties in resolving the heterogeneity of the definitions of the concept itself. In *“The Concept of Social Movements”* (1992) Diani argues that it is possible to find linkages between the various schools of thought which define social movements; what he calls a “proposal for synthesis” of the four main trends in literature around social movements since the 1960s. His paper, therefore, begins with a summary of the four main perspectives on social movements, before suggesting the means by which he feels these heterogeneous threads might be synthesised into a workable definition. He describes these four main trends as such: “Collective Behaviour” perspectives (attributed primarily to Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian), “Resource Mobilisation Theory” (RMT) (Mayer Zald and John McCarthy), the “Political Process” perspective (Charles Tilly) and finally “New Social Movements” (NSMs) (Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci). These perspectives will be described below, though Diani recognises that his paper is by no means an exhaustive literature review on the subject – so further detail not included in “The Concept of Social Movements” will be included, and Diani’s proposal for synthesis will be covered at the end of the literature review to summarise and propose a new concept by which these heterogeneous strands might be reconciled.

2.1 Collective Behaviour

The review of social movement literature will start with an examination of the Collective Behaviour perspective on social movements. Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian wrote out of the Chicago School beginning in the 1950s, and they draw on both sociological and psychological concepts to detail the nature of collective behaviour. Their definition of social

movements as “Collective Behaviour” (1987) is in contrast to “organisational” or “institutional” behaviour. Their book is concerned with all types of collective behaviour and whilst its main focus is group behaviour in crowds, it begins to develop the idea of collective behaviour in social movements: *“the important question in deciding whether collective behaviour concepts can be applied... concerns the relative determinacy and spontaneity of... behavior”*. For the most part, at least compared to group behaviour in crowds, the actions of social movements are a more organised form of collectivity (in that they develop an “enduring group identity” and are likely to have a plan of action etc.) however, they are set in opposition to prevalent and established norms and values. In his definition, Diani emphasises that this does not mean that they are consigned to disorganised or irrational behaviour; instead collective behaviour merely represents a looser organisational presentation. Turner and Killian emphasise the importance of an emergent norm – a shared view of reality which exists between the participants in a social movement to coordinate collective behaviour. For social movements, these emergent norms may become *“highly elaborated ideologies such as the environmentalists’ view of the consequences of ecological imbalance and the Marxist view of class struggle”* (Turner and Killian, 1987:8). Membership and leadership are more loosely defined than for organisational or institutional behaviours, individuals may emerge as leaders from the crowd, whilst others may take up other hierarchical positions (followers, bystanders, opponents etc.).

In Turner and Killian's definition, social movements are composed of three main features: a “value-orientation” – that is an established program, “power-orientation” – that is established power relationships, and “participation-orientation” – that is gratification experienced by members of the movement (Turner and Killian, 1987). Each orientation is essential in every social movement, but might be present in different social movements in varying degrees

(such that one movement might be considered a value-oriented movement, whilst another might be a power-oriented movement etc.).

Collective behaviour represents a group of people acting with “*some continuity to promote or resist change in the society or organisation of which it is part*” (ibid, 1987:223) in which membership is indefinite and shifting, and leadership is not assigned to positions based upon some legitimate authority or formal process, but rather as an informal response to adherents. In Turner and Killian’s definition, whilst social movement organisations often carry out a great deal of the work within social movements, and will frequently attempt to speak on behalf of entire movements; they are not necessarily the same as social movements. The distinction between social movement organisations and social movements will become an important feature of this study.

2.2 Resource Mobilisation Theory

Resource Mobilisation Theory (hereby referred to as RMT), in contrast to the collective behaviour perspective, pays greater attention to organisational factors within social movements. In “*Resource Mobilization and Social Movements*” (1977) Zald and McCarthy begin by explicitly separating themselves from what they perceive to be more psychology-based approaches such as the collective behaviour approach as discussed above. The RMT approach depends more upon political, sociological and economic theories than upon the social psychology of collective behaviour. Curiously, Diani states that in fact Zald and McCarthy’s definition of social movements does not differ greatly from Turner and Killian’s, they describe it as a “*set of opinions and beliefs which represent preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society*” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977:1217-1218). In contrast to Turner and Killian, however, RMT’s main concern is

with the means by which such beliefs are translated into concrete action. As such, RMT puts emphasis on the conditions by which social movement organisations are formed and operate, as well as the means by which these organisations cooperate or compete (Zald and McCarthy, 1980). Zald and McCarthy define social movement organisations as: *“a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals”* (ibid, 1977:1218).

Zald and McCarthy suggest that these interactions between social movement organisations take place through “social movement sectors” (Zald and McCarthy, 1977). In this view, social movement organisations do not exist as isolated actors, rather they interact with other organisations, even if this coordination is not formalised. Additionally, Social movement “constituencies” often significantly overlap.

Zald and McCarthy state that several emphases are required to understand social movements:

- Study of aggregation of resources (money and labour). Resources are necessary for engagement in social conflict, and so they must be aggregated.
- Resource aggregation requires at least some minimal form of organisation. As a result, they focus more upon social movement organisations than other authors have in the past.
- In accounting for a movement’s successes and failures there is an explicit recognition of the importance of involvement from individuals and organisations from outside the social movement.
- An explicit (if crude) model of supply and demand is sometimes applied to understand resources moving towards and away from the movement.

- There is sensitivity to the importance of costs and rewards to individuals and organisations involved in the movement.

(Zald and McCarthy, 1977:1216)

They then move onto contrasting their “resource mobilisation” perspective with more traditional social movement theory:

In terms of support base, where traditional theories saw social movements as based upon aggrieved populations providing the necessary resources and labour, resource mobilisation theory states that this may or may not be the case, in some cases “*conscience constituents, individual and organizational, may provide major sources of support*” (ibid, 1977:1216). In some cases, resources may even come from sources that have no commitment to the values that underlie specific movements. Regarding strategies and tactics, where traditional theory argues that social movement leaders use bargaining, persuasion or violence to influence authorities (chosen tactics might vary with history of relations with authorities, relative success of previous encounters or ideologies etc.), resource mobilization theory argues that whilst there may be interaction between movements and authorities, there are a number of strategic tasks which movements must complete (mobilising supporters, neutralising and/or transforming mass and elite publics into sympathisers and achieving change in targets). Sometimes there might be conflict when behaviour aimed at achieving one aim conflicts with another (an example might be hacktivist movements which emphasise freedom of information, but then engage in website attacks which limit public access to websites – thereby limiting access to the information stored on those websites). Tactics may also be limited by inter-organisational competition or cooperation. Finally, regarding the relation to larger society, traditionally case studies have emphasised the effects of the environment upon movement organisations, but have ignored ways in which such organisations can utilise the

environment for their own purposes. Zald and McCarthy argue that this might be due to there being a lack of comparative organisational focus inherent in case studies. Analytical studies place emphasis upon the extent of hostility or toleration in society. Both society and culture are treated as descriptive, historical context. For RMT, society provides the infrastructure upon which social movement industries (and other industries) are built. Examples of provided resources include communication media, affluence, and access to institutional centres, networks, occupational structure and growth (ibid, 1977:1217).

Zald and McCarthy acknowledge that their work is largely based upon American cases, and so there are societal differences which have not necessarily been considered. They also recognise that, for the most part, their work is based upon studies of left-leaning movements, and excludes those on the right.

2.3 Political Process

Charles Tilly's approach to social movements sees them as less involved with organisational issues, rather, he sees them as more of an attempt to engage with political power. In his "political process" model, underrepresented interests attempt to make changes to the exercise of power by making visible their intention to the persons holding that power, to Tilly social movements are:

"a sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support"

(Tilly, 1984:306).

Coming from a historical perspective, Tilly analyses periods of intense contention and maps the changing “repertoires” of collective action.

In contrast to Zald and McCarthy, Tilly focuses on the overall dynamics which comprise a social movement, rather than the individual organisations or actors involved. As Diani describes it, in Tilly's definition social movements are an organised, sustained, self-conscious challenge which implies shared identity among participants (Tilly, 1984:303).

2.4 New Social Movements

Both RMT and Tilly's political process approach focus very much on the “how” of social movements, but seem to skip over the “why”:

“In other words, they focus on the conditions which constrain the occurrence of events, taking the existence of potential grievances for granted.”

(Diani, 1992:5).

In contrast to this, the New Social Movements (NSM) approach attempts to relate social movements to large-scale structural and cultural changes. Alain Touraine (1981) attempts to identify social movements with the most dominant conflict in each society. So, in an industrial society, the most dominant conflict is between work and labour, in a more technological society the dominant conflict may be between technocrats and their adversaries (Diani, 1992). In this structure, all other conflicts are relegated to subordination to the dominant conflict and movements which build up around them can be considered “sub-

movements”, “communitarian movements” or “national movements” – it is only with the dominant or core conflict that we can talk about a “social movement”.

The individuals involved in these movements, then, build a shared identity within these conflicts and in relation to their opponent in these conflicts. Social movements are, then:

“combinations of a principle of identity, a principle of opposition and a principle of totality”

(Touraine, 1981:81). The social movement acts as a means by which individuals might identify each other, themselves and their stake in the conflict. Finally, Touraine’s New Social Movements perspective acknowledges the high degree of variance in beliefs and orientations *within* social movements and he suggests a “sociological intervention” methodology to better approach and capture these varying orientations and to help the actors themselves gain a better understanding of their actions (Touraine, 1981:139ff).

Alberto Melucci is an Italian writer who engages with the idea of collective identities and social movements. Melucci (1985) agrees with Touraine on many points, but disagrees with regards to the idea of the core conflict being the only instance where a social movement can operate

In “Nomads of the Present” (1989) Melucci suggests four alternative features of social movements:

- i. They challenge the logic of complex systems primarily on symbolic grounds.
- ii. They not only seek to attain political goals, but also practice the social changes they seek.
- iii. They are submerged in the social networks of everyday life.
- iv. Contemporary social movements are acutely aware of the planetary dimensions of life in complex societies.

Melucci recognises that social movements are not limited to engaging with “visible” political concerns, rather overt public action is but one part of the experience of social movements, as even when they are not engaging in embodied protests or campaigns they may well be engaged in cultural production. In fact, some groups may only occasionally engage in the political arena and instead may operate in “*movement areas*” or “*networks of groups or individuals sharing a conflictual culture and a collective identity*” (Melucci, 1985).

2.5 Proposal for Synthesis

The above four strands are the main theories on social movements which have emerged since the 1960s. Returning to “The Concept of Social Movements” (1992), Mario Diani identifies, within these four competing definitions, four salient aspects of social movement dynamics which will feed into his idea of synthesising these perspectives:

- i. Networks of informal interaction;
- ii. Shared beliefs and solidarity;
- iii. Collective action on conflictual issues;
- iv. Action which displays largely outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of life.

(Diani, 1992:7)

He builds each of these conclusions up as the paper progresses, after each aspect suggesting a new definition of social movements built upon the conclusions drawn from all the aspects

covered before. This means that by the end of the paper Diani has built a new definition of social movement which synthesises all the above features.

2.5.1 Networks of Informal Interaction

Diani identifies elements of these four social movement perspectives which seem to acknowledge networks of informal interaction. Touraine's NSM perspective describes social movements as collective actors where organisations, individuals and groups play a role (Touraine, 1981:150). McCarthy and Zald's RMT places greater emphasis on a "*set of opinions and beliefs*" and this requires the transforming of these features into action through the interaction of specific social movement organisations, constituents, adherents and "bystander publics" (McCarthy and Zald, 1977:1223). Elements of these networks can also be seen in McCarthy and Zald's "social movement sectors" and "micro mobilization context", the latter of which was a concept discussed in Zald and McCarthy's later work – defined as a space in which a small group might bring together processes of collective attribution and rudimentary forms of organisation in order to produce mobilisation for collective action (McAdam et al., 1988). Diani argues that the newer ideas of "micro mobilization contexts" updated the earlier hierarchical concept of the relationships between constituents and social movement organisations, and so brought it closer to the definition proposed by Alberto Melucci as part of the NSM perspective. It is the plurality of actors involved in social movements, and the informality of the linkages between these actors which these two perspectives (RMT and NSM) have begun to agree upon. Diani suggests that a "synthetic definition" of this aspect might read as follows:

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations”

(Diani, 1992:8)

2.5.2 Shared Beliefs and Solidarity

When discussing shared beliefs and solidarity, Diani begins by reiterating Zald and McCarthy’s emphasis on how a social movement must present a *“set of shared opinions and beliefs”*, how Melucci identifies the requirement for *“solidarity”* and Touraine, Melucci and Tilly all emphasise the importance of *“identity”*. For Turner and Killian, the continuity of social actions is reliant upon *“shared identities”* and *“ideologies”* – identities, in this instance, are defined broadly to be very close to the idea of *“beliefs”* (Turner and Killian, 1987). Similarly, collective identity and solidarity, for Diani, can be considered synonymous in this context – because you cannot conceive of one without the other. They are connected because you cannot develop a sense of belongingness without also developing sympathetic feelings associated with the perception of a *“common fate to share”* (Melucci, 1984, in Diani, 1992).

For Zald and McCarthy, their *“shared opinions and beliefs”* do not necessarily imply shared feelings of belongingness, but again their more recent work on *“micro mobilisation contexts”* and also *“frame alignment processes”* (i.e., how individuals understand a situation) suggest a growing concern for the process of mediation which supports the commitment of individuals to a movement.

Collective identities define the boundaries between what it is to be in-group or out-of-group. Here Diani does not directly reference Norbert Elias' writings on this subject – but Elias' analysis of the established and ruling groups in his research subject of Winston Parva in

comparison to the “outsiders” of this same community, is a useful touchstone in the concept of in-group, out-group behaviours. In “The Established and the Outsiders” (Elias, 1994), Elias and Scotson described how the “ruling” segments of the fictionalised community of Winston Parva would cement their superiority by defining themselves through an image of an idealised group, whereas the “others” or “outsiders” would instead be defined by less favourable imagery and were so excluded.

Actors define themselves not only in relation to their own perception of themselves, but also via their perceptions of how others see them – in this way a collective identity plays a central role in defining the boundaries which surround and constrain a movement. Only those who display the shared opinions and beliefs can be considered to be part of the movement. Diani is keen to emphasise that this does not mean there is total homogeneity of opinions and beliefs across the board – a wide range of beliefs may be held across the movement, and conflicts may indeed occur. Therefore, a constant process of “realignment” (Snow et al, 1986) and “negotiation” (Melucci, 1989) must occur between actors inside the movement.

A collective identity gives meaning to collective actions and events, which might not otherwise have been considered as part of the common process. Through a “framing process”, a distinct social actor becomes evident. A social movement with shared beliefs constantly reorients definitions on existing issues, and might give rise to new public issues as a result: *“The process of identity formation cannot be separated from the process of symbolic redefinition of both what is real and possible”* (Diani, 1992:9). Collective identity even persists over time as it is separate to the public activities of demonstrations or protests, giving the movement continuity over time (Melucci, 1989; Turner and Killian, 1987). Diani concludes the segment by suggesting a synthesised definition:

“The boundaries of a social movement network are defined by the specific collective identity shared by the actors involved in the interaction”

(Diani, 1992:9)

2.5.3 Collective Action on Conflictual Issues

Touraine, Melucci and Tilly put emphasis on conflict as a core component in social movements. Turner and Killian, and Zald and McCarthy, however, see processes of social change fulfilling this role – though even they acknowledge that engagement with social change processes often leads to conflictual relations with other actors/groups/organisations. So, there is at least a broad agreement that conflict is a feature of social movements, though it is understood differently by different writers.

Touraine argues that the conflict associated with social movements is focused upon “historicity”, which he defines as the *“overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society”* (Touraine, 1981:81). For Melucci, social movements typify actions which challenge the processes of systemic domination. Finally, Diani makes the distinction between scholars who focus upon conflict which leads to cultural or personal change (Melucci, Turner and Killian) whilst others focus on actors in the political sphere (Tilly, McCarthy and Zald). Diani argues, however, that many of these inconsistencies between perspectives are not necessarily real. Touraine and Melucci both use the term “social movements” to apply to a specific concept within the broader definition of “movements”: Touraine making the distinction between types of movement (communitarian, nationalist, cultural etc.), and Melucci separating social movements (which operate at the systemic level – i.e., seeking change in a society or organisation within society) from other types of collective action – so there are similarities between their perspectives.

Another presumed inconsistency which Diani questions is the separation between movements which address political issues and those which address cultural conflicts. Some authors argue that a great deal of social movement experience is found in the cultural sphere because what is challenged is not necessarily just the uneven distribution of goods and power, but also socially shared meanings: *“that is the ways of defining and interpreting reality”* (Diani, 1992:10). Social movements are increasingly beginning to focus on self-transformation – conflicts that arise in areas formerly considered part of the private sphere (such as problems of self-definition and dominant life-styles) – this definition does differ from the more politically-focused perspective given by Zald, McCarthy and certainly Tilly. Diani, however, argues that these differences are of emphasis rather than differences in incompatible notions of what it is to be a social movement. The existence and importance of cultural movements has never been denied by proponents of resource mobilisation theory (such as Zald and McCarthy) or the political process perspective (such as Charles Tilly). So finally, Diani suggests a synthesised component of social movements:

“Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts, meant to promote or oppose social change either at the systemic or non-systemic level.”

(Diani, 1992:11)

2.5.4 Action which primarily occurs outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life

Diani argues that the idea that non-institutionalised behaviour forms the key nature of social movements has become a rather outdated idea – and modern scholars are more cautious with such an assumption – by this Diani means that by the previous understanding social

movement activity would be typified by actions which fall outside of the routine procedures of everyday life, and require the individual actors to engage with activity with which they would ordinarily not be involved. Similarly, the ideas of “collective effervescence” and “nascent states” are both considered to be features of the *emergence* of social movements, rather than a more distinctive feature which remains beyond this initial phase. He states that it has been shown that social movements can continue even after this initial phase of collective effervescence, and this phase is not necessarily immediately followed by institutionalisation (i.e., where initial enthusiasm over social movement action begins to move more towards actions which do not differ from the norm). Rather, the interaction between institutional and non-institutional forms of action follows a more complex pattern. Social movements might be an agent of change at the level of symbolic codes (as emphasised by Melucci) or contribute to the creation of new opportunities for interest intermediation. Social movements may even arise which do not require a period of “collective effervescence” – if their collective identity is strong enough then they might foster sustained collection action without a required “nascent state” (Diani, 1990b).

As the relationship between non-institutional behaviour and social movements is not strong enough to confirm that one is a fundamental feature of the other, then it might be said that you cannot necessarily distinguish social movements from other political actors solely through their adoption of non-standard patterns of political behaviour. Diani argues that whilst it might hold that social movements can be distinguishable from other political actors in their adoption of public protest as a method of political engagement, this might only be said to apply to political movements, and public protest typically only plays a marginal role in movements seeking personal or cultural change. Therefore, if by Diani’s definition these personal or cultural movements might be counted under the banner of “social movements”

then there is no reason to include the requirement for non-institutional behaviour in the definition.

Another assumption questioned by Diani is the idea that organisations involved in social movements are “*basically loosely structured*” (Diani, 1992:12). He argues that looseness is an essential property of the interactions between organisations involved in social movements (as noted earlier in this review); this looseness does not necessarily extend to the individual units of the system. The wide range of organisations, groups and individuals who might comprise a social movement is incredibly heterogeneous and whilst loosely structured organisations may represent a dominant part of the system, they are not their only component. Even collective behaviour proponents such as Turner and Killian (1987) have noted that both collective and organisational behaviours are required principles in social movements.

Whilst violent, disruptive and otherwise non-standard behaviours might allow for easier differentiation *between* movements, they do not appear to be a universal feature of every social movement – and so cannot be considered fundamental to the definition of the concept. Diani, therefore, suggests the following final definition – a synthesis of the four features discussed above:

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”

(Diani, 1992:13)

This section has covered the four main social movement theories which have emerged since the 1960s. Summarising the collective behaviour, resource mobilisation, political process and new social movements perspectives before covering Mario Diani’s synthetic definition which

attempts to bring each of these definitions together to create one which takes them all into account. Diani's work, however, is limited insofar as it considers traditional social movement theories which address movements in the mid to late 20th century – having been written in 1992. There exist numerous writers who have addressed the concept of social movements in a more technologically advanced age, looking at the presentation of the concept in a period of time defined more than ever by the fluidity of traditionally thought rigid constructs such as communities, boundaries, identities, time and place. In this literature review I will cover three particular writers concerning social movements in the modern era: Tiziana Terranova and *Network Culture* (2004), Jodi Dean and her perspective of the Occupy Movement in *Crowds and the Party* (2016), and Marco Deseriis' concept of the *Improper Name* (2015).

In *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (Terranova, 2004) Tiziana Terranova problematises the role of information, its primacy in the modern era and its impact upon a number of social concepts such as culture, politics and, most importantly: labour. Terranova argues that information has ceased to be the “content of communication” and instead becomes a body – that is, given a “materiality in its connection with the world of physics, engineering and biology”. Terranova goes on to cover information theory (focussing on Claude E. Shannon's paper written in 1948 – “The Mathematical Theory of Communication”) – and she picks out a piece of this theory: the idea of the signal to noise ratio. In her introduction to *Network Culture*, Terranova states that her book is about:

“a cultural formation, a network culture, that seems to be characterized by an unprecedented abundance of informational output and by an acceleration of informational dynamics.”

(Terranova, 2004:1)

Terranova links this “abundance of informational output” to Shannon's idea of “signal to noise”, pointing to a world defined by a vast interconnectedness of communications – some

technological connections, others not – In the world as described by Terranova, information no longer travels from sender to receiver, but rather communications no longer maintain their narrow boundaries between information flows, and they breach into other flows, mutate and intermingle on a vast informational plane. She cautions, though, that this is not necessarily indicative of the destruction wrought by information, and a process of the world sinking into immateriality as information prevails – but rather that information itself has a materiality (a point of information theory that Terranova challenges) and though this kind acceleration of history is, in fact, a creative destruction: a productive movement that has the potential to be transformative in output.

Perhaps the most impactful concept to emerge from Terranova's work is the idea of "Free labor" in the kind of world described above. Terranova brings in Italian post-workerist and autonomist theories to argue that much of the activity of modern life which is lived, nurtured and filtered through the internet represents a vast production of "free labor" – that is the cultural and technical work which is central to the running of the internet and is pervasive in post-industrial economies. Terranova questions whether this kind of work blurs the boundaries between production and consumption, though she warns that it does not necessarily mean we might automatically turn *"every user into an active producer, and every worker into a creative subject"*. She describes the implementation of free labor in the Digital Economy:

"The digital economy is an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labour. It is about specific forms of production (web design, multimedia production, digital services and so on), but it is also about forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters and so on."

(ibid, 2004:79)

Here Terranova's work begins to intersect with social movement literature – she argues that the digital economy is not simply the process of traditional capitalist industries moving in on subcultures and absorbing them, but rather it is more useful to consider these subcultures as already and always capitalistic in nature, and so their monetization simply the process of channelling labour into monetary flows (ibid, 2004:80). Terranova argues that subcultural movements have always been capitalistic in nature: she points to members of subcultures as participating in the production of traditionally capitalist products such as CDs, video games and films and doing so voluntarily. The incorporation of subcultural movements is not signifying any kind of significant change, but rather the inevitable next step in an already capitalistic process.

Terranova's perspective of subcultures and subcultural movements is a somewhat pessimistic one, it questions their position to invoke change in the world if their position was already one of inevitable absorption into the capitalist machine. This thesis, I hope, will go some way to demonstrate that there emerged a movement in the intervening years since the publication of Terranova's work and the present day which resisted capitalistic absorption, and persevered as a potent political player from 2008 to the present day through several novel means – the Anonymous movement.

Network Culture was written in 2004, several years after Diani's proposal for synthesis, but still over a decade before the date of the writing of this thesis. Jodi Dean's work "Crowds and Party", however, was written in 2016 (conversely, a year after the cease of substantive data collection for this study) and concerns her experiences with the Occupy movement in the preceding years. Dean argues that the Occupy movement emerged out of a lack of a "capacity to give social struggles political form" (Dean, 2016:264), and an urge to revive the party as a potent organisational form.

Dean begins with an examination of her minute-to-minute experience at an Occupy Wall Street protest, and it is through the story of these moments that her thesis is presented:

The protesters start out hopefully, driven and exuberant – the public are on their side, they support them in their opposition to the police, as do local businesses and for a while they are successful – they repeat the protest chants which ring out across the crowd, but that jubilation is brought down to earth when the protesters begin to speak and communicate their message over the megaphone:

“We can take this park!

We can take this park!

We can take this park tonight!

We can take this park tonight!

We can also take this park another night.

We can also take this park another night.

Not everyone may be ready tonight.

Not everyone may be ready tonight.

Each person has to make their own autonomous decision.

Each person has to make their own autonomous decision.

No one can decide for you. You have to decide for yourself.

No one can decide for you. You have to decide for yourself.

Everyone is an autonomous individual.

Everyone is an autonomous individual.”

Dean points to this moment as a demonstration of the contradiction inherent in the occupy movement: they are a collective of individuals, and so the collective strength of the movement is devolved to individual preoccupations, individual decisions and the freedom of the crowd at large is destroyed (Dean, 2016:3). Dean points to other elements of individuality within wider

modern social movements such as the tendency to delegate to, and then idolise certain individual leaders amongst “the crowd” as taking responsibility for the actions of the movement.

Despite this perspective, Dean is optimistic insofar as she believes that “The Crowd” challenges the Left to rethink the future: *“Through what political forms might we advance?”* (Dean, 2016:4). Dean discusses her definition of “The Crowd”: she dismisses its linkage with democracy, arguing that in her definition the crowd transcends democracy, *“The crowd does not have a politics. It is the opportunity for politics. The determination whether a crowd was a mob or the people results from political struggle.”* It is its intersection with “the Party” that gives the crowd the political struggle which delineates it from a mob. So, whilst Dean’s perspective on Occupy (like all societies) sows the seeds of its destruction in its focus on individualism, she does believe that modern social movements, when linked to “The Party”, might be a fruitful method of encouraging social change.

The final modern social movement writer covered here will be Marco Deseriis, and specifically his work *“Improper Names: Collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names as minor processes of subjectivation”* (2015). “Improper Name” refers to the adoption of the same pseudonym by organisations, collectives or individual authors – and it is important for the following thesis because that is precisely what Anonymous have done.

Deseriis argues that though improper names exist in numerous cultural and social contexts, they all share three common features and traits:

“

1. *empowering a subaltern social group by providing a medium for identification and mutual recognition to their users;*
2. *enabling those who do not have a voice of their own to acquire a symbolic power outside the boundaries of an institutional practice; and*

3. *expressing collective and singular processes of subjectivation characterized by the proliferation of difference.*”

(Deseriis, 2015:141)

Deseriis’ work is important to detail here in brief, as his insights will be scattered throughout the conclusions drawn from the data in the rest of this thesis – but his improper name concept will be covered in more detail here to lend context to the insights later in the text.

Improper names are contrasted with “proper names” used to designate a single referent; an improper name intentionally obfuscates the identity of its referent. The improper name has the shielding effect of any pseudonym: that is the protection of the individual by shielding their identity, but because it is also adopted by a potential great many people the improper name can hardly even be ascribed a single individual referent at any one time.

Deseriis argues that improper names are forms of symbolic power, invoking Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of the concept of power emerging out of the imposing of a legitimate vision of the world, that is the composing and decomposing of the social world by naming new groups out of the old (Bourdieu, 1991:22). Bourdieu argues that the power to invoke this kind of definition comes from the possession of “symbolic capital” that is the *“power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition”* (ibid, 1991:23).

Deseriis argues that when it comes to improper names the symbolic power does not rest with a ministry or authorised spokesperson whose authority is drawn from institutional practice, but rather managed by the community as a whole.

The proper name’s function is to refer to and identify an individual referent, in this sense it is a political technology: an integral part of government, statistics and a central feature of record keeping, the enforcement of the rule of law and so on. The proper name is a precondition of modern politics – that a proper name should refer and identify a single individual, identifiable

and definable by the state. If the proper name is a political technology, then the improper name is a “Collective Assemblage of Enunciation” (Deseriis, 2015:152) – it serves almost precisely the opposite function to the proper name: it obfuscates the individual, can refer to numerous referents, makes the application of government, politics and law almost impossible and renders the individual unidentifiable and undefinable by the state. It challenges the mechanisms by which an individual is objectified. And because the state first attempts to reduce the individual to a political, epistemological and biological unit fundamentally in place, the emergence of subjectivities which do not properly fit this schema challenge the power of the state (ibid, 2015:152).

Deseriis’ work on improper names brings in a number of examples of the phenomena including, but not limited to: Alan Smithee (a common stand in for film directors who do not want their name attached to a particular production), Luther Blisset (a popular activist pseudonym in the 90s) and, most pertinently for this thesis, Anonymous – the name employed by members of the hacktivist movement which is the subject of this work. Deseriis’ work is not a comprehensive perspective on social movements, but rather the examination and codification of a particular feature (or tool) employed by movements, and one which is of particular note for this thesis.

The above three writers are either positive about the potential impact of social movements and their activities, but they each speak to the very particular nature of the world in which modern social movements are live or die – a world whose pervasive observation, communication and surveillance technology either smothers, absorbs or forces evolution in its social movements.

Out of these different perspectives of Social Movements emerges three sociological terms requiring explanation: networks, organisations and institutions. Each perspective on social movements uses one or more of these terms in their description of the ways in which discrete objects relate to one another. They are terms which are not interchangeable and have assumptions of their own attached to them. What follows here is a brief overview of these three

concepts, such that their usage in the above review of social movement literature might be more sharply understood. The borders between these concepts are somewhat blurred, with existing literature which seeks to understand the institutional theory of organisations, or conversely, the organisational theory of institutions, and the networks which either exist within these institutions and organisations, or between them. Nevertheless, these concepts can be teased out and must be understood separately before any composite of the concepts might be made, as an understanding of organisations, institutions and networks will assist in understanding the relationships between the groups and actors with which the rest of the thesis will engage.

2.6 Institutions

As described above, the definition of institutions can be difficult to pin down – Geoffrey M. Hodgson, Professor of Business Studies at Hertfordshire University, recognises that there is no unanimity in definition of institution and this heterogeneity has led many writers to abandon the attempts to define the concept, much like how Diani noted writers skipped conceptual questions in favour of practical ones in their study of social movements. Again, much like Diani, Hodgson recognises that it is not possible to carry out analyses of institutions without first having an adequate definition of the concept.

Hodgson's paper "*What are Institutions?*" (2006) proposes that this abandonment of conceptual questions is too hasty, and a consensual definition is possible once certain difficulties are handled. Hodgson argues that much of human interaction is governed by overt or implicit rules – he defines institutions as "*Systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interaction*" (ibid, 2006:2). Examples he cites are money, law, language, systems of weights and measures and table manners. He also states that firms are institutions, but qualifies this statement with "*(and other organizations)*", which is another example of how these definitions of institutions, organisations and networks become nested within one another.

Hodgson goes on to define a “convention” as a particular instantiation of an institutional rule, citing Robert Sugden (1986) and John Searle (1995). As an example, within the British institutional traffic rules it is a convention to drive on the left – all countries have traffic rules (the institution) and each country has a particular convention regarding which side of the road to drive upon.

Institutions, in this sense, exist such that we might reasonably predict the behaviour of others, and so act and react accordingly – it is this usefulness which gives them durability over time.

“Institutions enable ordered thought, expectation, and action by imposing form and consistency on human activities. They depend upon the thoughts and activities of individuals but are not reducible to them.”

(Hodgson, 2006:2)

The term “rules” here requires clarification. Rules are understood as a socially transmitted and customary normative injunction. Examples of rules might be: in circumstances X do Y such as “if you bump into another person in a hallway, apologise” – which Hodgson refers to as an immanently normative disposition. Another example might be a large class of actions Y which are prohibited. A rule might be considered, acknowledged and followed without much thought; it does not necessarily refer to a rule of law.

Whilst the use of the term “rules” might suggest only constraint, in fact institutions both constrain and enable behaviour – for example, language gives rules which allow people to communicate effectively with one another, traffic rules enable safe and efficient movement of vehicles, and rules of law protect people from harm.

Hodgson warns against one of the standard definitions of institutions as existing solely as

behaviour – as it is implicit that if said behaviour is interrupted, then the institutions cease to exist. Hodgson asks, “*does the British Monarchy cease to exist when the members of the royal family are all asleep and no royal ceremony is taking place?*” (ibid, 2006:3) Of course not – the royal prerogatives and powers exist beyond the behavioural ceremony which surrounds them and it is these powers which define the institution, not the behaviour. He does concede, however, that if these powers are not exercised frequently then they may lapse or fade. Furthermore, he argues that the only way we can observe institutions is through this manifest behaviour.

Finally, institutions come into being through the enforcement and enactment of the behaviour in question – as an example, laws become rules when the avoidance or performance of the behaviour to which they apply becomes customary and acquires a normative status.

2.7 Organisations

Literature concerning organisations is heavily linked to the socioeconomic concept of the “Firm”. Here I will cover three separate concepts of the Firm: the neoclassical, the managerial and the behavioural.

2.7.1 Neoclassical Theory of the Firm

In the neoclassical theory of the firm, firms are modelled as “Reactors” (Machlup, 1967:8) and are understood as if they are a single entity, that is: the internal decision-making processes are irrelevant. Such a firm – under perfect competition – continues to produce output until marginal cost is equal to marginal revenue. If equilibrium is reached, the price equals average cost of production and so there would be zero profits for the industry. Whilst profits are positive or

negative, firms enter and leave the system and it is not in equilibrium. Critics of this model, whilst acknowledging that the internal logic is “impeccable” (Latsis, 1972:219) argue that it is inconsistent with reality and consistently ignores the disruptive impact of agency on such a system. The neoclassical view sees firms as a “black box” (Sawyer, 1979:9) where it receives inputs and produces outputs, and this leaves little room for studies of management or organisation.

Marschak (1965) in the “Handbook of Organisations” describes the issues with neoclassical theories of the firm and organisations:

“The economists’ theory of the firm has not been, at least until very recently, a theory of organization, for the theory ignored the fact that a firm is a group of individuals and dealt with the firm as if it were, in effect, a single person.”

(Marschak, 1965:447)

A useful theory of a firm, in this view, is one which makes good predictions about behaviour in the market. Realism is of secondary importance, and a realistic theory would not be considered as useful as one which is simple. A seeing as the idea of the firm as a single entity, the empty box which simply required appropriate inputs to produce appropriate outputs, was the simplest explanation of all – no other view, at the time, was suggested (Marschak, 1965:447).

2.7.2 Managerial Theories of the Firm

During the 1960s there were challenges to the neoclassical theory of the firm from two important fronts: the managerial perspective and the behavioural perspective.

In “*The Modern Corporation and Private Property*” (1967) Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means

challenged neoclassical theories of the firm by suggesting that a large proportion of American companies were in fact controlled by their managers, rather than by their owners – and these managers consistently pursued objectives which were not solely profit driven. This view of firms is called “Managerialism” in sociology and economics and it is one of the main issues which have fuelled debate in both economics and organisational theory (Rowlinson, 1997:15). In response to the threat of the work from Berle and Means, economists refined the managerial theory of the firm such that it considered the ability of managers to affect changes within their firms.

The leading proponents of the managerial theory of the firm were William Baumol, Oliver Williamson and Robin Marris (Sawyer, 1979:7 in Rowlinson, 1997:16). Views of the firm which only consider profit maximisation are inadequate because they do not consider the other competitive conditions in which a firm operates which can allow managers to enjoy “considerable discretion” (Williamson, 1963:238, in Rowlinson, 1997:16). Baumol argues that managers will seek to maximise sales revenue for their firm, whereas Williamson argues that determinants of their behaviour might also be salary, status, power, prestige and security – and he uses these factors to create a formal model. Robin Marris discusses manager’s attempts to manipulate their firm’s reported profits to make it an unattractive target for a takeover (Sawyer, 1979:7).

Managerial theories of the firm do not necessarily accept the managerialist thesis – they are a response to it, and they are an assertion that neoclassical marginalist methodologies are not rendered redundant by the realisation that managers have some influence on the actions of firms.

2.7.3 Behavioural Theories of the Firm

The behavioural theory of the firm challenges neoclassical and managerial theories on the firm by problematizing the concept that economic actors are rational and that the firm can be treated as a single entity. Herbert Simons, James March and Richard Cyert are the leading figures in the behavioural school of thought (Rowlinson, 1997:17).

Whilst the behavioural school of thought does not completely reject the neoclassical theories of the firm, they do instead focus upon a different set of problems: “*The internal allocation of resources and the process of setting prices and outputs*” (Cyert and March, 1963:15). The neoclassical school makes behavioural assumptions to model changes in prices in an industry; the behavioural school make assumptions to understand the decision-making process within firms. The behavioural model of the firm treats the firm as if it is not a single unified entity, but rather it treats firms as if they have an internal decision-making process from which organisational goals emerge: “*People (i.e. individuals) have goals; collectives of people do not*” (ibid, 1963:26).

Behavioural theories of the firm assert that the idea of firms maximising profits is problematic. Firstly, there is a problem in defining the goals of a firm: the goals of a firm change according to the participants of the firm, and the processes of bargaining between them.

The goals of a firm are to reach satisfactory rather than optimal standards (March and Simon, 1961:140). To optimise, firms would need to continually compare and assess all alternative courses of action to determine the optimal one, in order simply to “satisfice” firms must only find an alternative course of action which meets a minimal acceptable standard (Simon, 1982:296). March and Simon draw a useful metaphor, stating that the optimal vs satisfactory comparison is “*the difference between searching a haystack to find the sharpest needle in it and searching a haystack to find a needle sharp enough to sew with*” (1961:140).

In the above discussion of social movements, the term “organisation” refers often to a grouping of people who come together to achieve a certain goal. Often these goals are political, societal or cultural. The goals of these organisations are unlikely to be explicitly profit oriented, and so the idea of the firm might appear to be of limited use. The ideas suggested in the above theories of the firm, however, might be applied to these organisations when we substitute “profit” with values.

2.8 Networks

The term “networks”, much like the other two concepts covered in the previous sections might have significantly different definitions depending upon the context in which it is employed. In the case of the definitions of social movement theories set out in the first section of this literature review it is important to understand that the usage of the term “network” refers to an abstract concept of a collection of entities with linkages between them. These entities might be individual people or groups of people, organisations or whole social movements.

2.9 Hacking and Hacktivism

This dissertation is the result of three years of observation and interviews with self-identifying members of the hacktivist movement known as Anonymous. The project can be situated in relation to a wider view of hacktivism, hacker culture and hacker identity – so it is worth identifying the broader academic space in which the project might be placed.

Academic literature which examines hacktivism covers numerous disciplines and perspectives: including, but not limited to law, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, security studies and

computer science. Some writers have split literature concerning hacktivism into two broad camps: one which attempts to understand hacktivism in the context of civil disobedience and one which attempted to understand it as cyberterrorism (Samuel, 2004:23).

This dichotomy still has some uses, literature from after the emergence of Anonymous, such as Gabriella Coleman's (2008 onwards) invaluable work, can be broadly slotted into one camp or the other if needs be. This will not, however, be the structure which this review will follow. It is important to recognise that since Samuel discussed this dichotomy, technology and society has changed significantly – of importance to this project is the rise of grass-roots protest movements such as Anonymous and Occupy – and as such academic research into these groups has changed also. So, comparing the 1984 work of Levy to the 2004 work of Jordan and Taylor (both of which will be discussed later in this chapter) makes sense for this review, but always the historical context within which these pieces were written must be considered. Even if these pieces of work were written within a few years of each other, their context remains important because societal and technological change was so rapid and so dramatic within that short time scale. The difference technologically and societally between the times written about in Levy (1984) and Turkle (1984) and those covered in more contemporary writers such as Coleman (2014) are dramatic enough such that it is possible to understand how literature concerning hacktivist groups has changed alongside the nature of hacktivism changing.

This review will follow the development of literature concerning hacktivism and hacktivist identity – beginning with the early work on computer hackers in the 1980s and 90s by writers such as Stephen Levy and Sherry Turkle, and following the timeline put forward by Jordan and Taylor (2004) moving forward through to the present day. Naturally, the strata detailed by Jordan and Taylor in *"Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?"* plots the rise of hacktivism until the book's publication in 2004 – after which point I will propose a further step in the development in hacktivism characterised by grass-roots protest movements such as

Anonymous and Occupy – at this point the review will bring back the social movement literature covered in the first half of this chapter, to demonstrate that the definitions given by contemporary writers on Anonymous are either insufficient, requiring updating or else they skip the conceptual question of defining the group altogether.

This review will cover the following points, which will plot the development of the literature around hacktivism and hacktivist identity since the 1980s; the first 4 points are covered in Jordan and Taylor's work, whereas the final point brings in more modern literature – and the intent is to cover the length and breadth of the discussion surrounding hacker identities and movements:

1. Original Hackers, Hacker Ethic and Tinkerers.
2. Second Wave Hackers: Microserfs and Open Source as a Response
3. Hacktivism and the Performance of Politics.
4. Hacktivism and Grassroots Protests.

2.9.1 Original Hackers, the Hacker Ethic and Tinkerers.

Much of the literature concerning the hacking culture as it existed in the second half of the 20th century used ethnographic approaches to examine the interactions of technically skilled students and academics and computer technology, this section will focus on two such pieces of work. Stephen Levy's (1984) and Sherry Turkle's (1984) work at that time was influenced and often concerning their experiences with the students and academics of Massachusetts Institute

of Technology (MIT) which was and remains a centre for technological innovation. These two pieces of work are of particular importance because they identify some of the ideas that would become central to many of the presentations of hacktivist identity over the proceeding decades.

Stephen Levy's (1984) work "*Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*" contributes the term "Hacker ethic" to the discourse – there are some similar ideas suggested in earlier literature, namely Ted Nelson's "*Computer Lib/Dream Machines*" (1974) but Levy's work is largely understood to have been the most comprehensive and documented study of the founding and development of the concept. The Hacker Ethic refers to a basic set of concepts, philosophies and beliefs which emerged in the hacking community beginning in the 1950s/60s and persisting up until the time the book was published and beyond.

Levy's work begins with a focus on a group of students and academics at MIT in the 1950s and 60s and progresses by detailing the evolving hacker culture from this time through to the 80s. He focuses on individuals and groups of people who are technically skilled and often socially excluded, and he is interested in their interactions with early computer technology and the ideas which sprung from these interactions. His work is ethnographic, and closely follows a group of students at the MIT artificial intelligence lab in the 1950s and 60s, the populist hardware hackers in California in the 1970s and finally the game hackers who worked during the "*personal computer*" age in the 1980s. The thread that Levy strings these chronologically separated groups together with is the concept of the "Hacker Ethic".

Broadly, the hacker ethic can be understood to refer to the idea that all information should be free and anything which constrains, obscures or obfuscates information is to its detriment. Similarly, information should be used for the greater good of people and to improve quality of life. Access to computers (and anything which can teach you something about the world) should

be unlimited and total. Decentralisation should be promoted and authority should not be trusted (Bureaucracies being the enemy of the free-flow of information exchange). Levy writes:

“Hackers believe that essential lessons can be learned about the world from taking things apart, seeing how they work, and using this knowledge to create new and even more interesting things.”

(Levy, 1984:32-33)

Levy’s work communicates the mistrust and perhaps even disgust that the MIT hackers felt for the more corporate side of computer technology – the epitome of which at the time was the American technology consulting company IBM. He describes IBM technologists as “batch-processed people”, and “IBM priests” (ibid, 1984:35) who were closed to criticism, and committed to a centralised view of how computing should occur, as opposed to the flexible and adaptive decentralised version favoured by the hackers he studied.

According to the hacker ethic, the only merit by which a hacker should be judged is the quality of his hacking skills – not race, education, age or position. Levy points out that this is not necessarily due to any inherent goodness of the hacker community, rather they cared more about how the hacker might contribute to the advancement of the technology rather than any of the traits listed above. Whilst this dismissal of identity traits as valid judgements of a person’s worth would seem to include sex or gender, neither are explicitly mentioned in the book and the subjects of Levy’s ethnography appear to be almost exclusively male – the presence of women and the place of femininity in hacker culture is more extensively explored by Turkle (1984) which will be discussed later in this review.

The hacker ethic also comprises an assertion that computer technology can create art and

beauty. Here Levy makes the distinction between the beauties created by the output of a program (The example he gives is a program which creates music) and the code itself having an inherent beauty. Such as the example of MIT hacker Peter Samson's code which included the cryptic lone notation "*RIPJSB*" alongside the number 1750: after much discussion amongst his fellow hackers it emerged that this was Samson's tribute to the year Bach died – "*Rest in Peace Johann Sebastian Bach*".

He identifies the aesthetics of programming as they evolved – anecdotes of notation accompanying code, programs being beautiful or artful in their elegant simplicity – a program which was complex, but written with only a small amount of code could be thought of as artful. Whereas a program which was loaded with many instructions, such that it was bulky and overloaded the limited computer systems upon which it was run was less beautiful and indicates an effort to "brute force" a solution to a problem. Such a program would require "bumming": the process of "shaving off" instructions to make the program more efficient with fewer lines of code.

Levy notes that this ethic formed around the MIT hacking group which he was observing slowly and without their awareness – there was no manifesto or written constitution which would set these tenets in stone, rather they were unwritten, unspoken, and silently agreed upon.

Levy's work has been criticized for being too journalistic, as opposed to academic, in approach. Levy was a journalist by trade – though he focused on computer technology, cryptography and hacker culture. Anita Susan Grossman states that "*'Hackers'* reads like a monstrously overblown magazine article written in chatty, fragmented prose." (Grossman, 1984:1) – Though this might be a stylistic criticism, as opposed to one directed towards the quality or validity of the book's content. Aside from the Hacker Ethic, the book is a collection of

anecdotal insights into the characters and situations surrounding these technically skilled individuals and their machines. Levy's work is invaluable as a documentation of the hacker culture as it existed at the time, but Sherry Turkle's (1984) work published around the same time, perhaps contributes more academically to the discourse.

Sherry Turkle is an academic who wrote about the hacker culture at MIT in the 1980s. Like Levy, Turkle's (1984) *"The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit"* is also an ethnographic piece of work, though it concerns a much wider audience – she describes her research population as *"a moving target"* due to the rapid advance of computer technology. Where Levy's work examined closely the hacker culture of MIT, hardware hackers and personal computer hackers, Turkle's work concerns more broadly the relationship between man and machine – and more specifically, people and computer technology. Turkle brings in elements of psychology, as she considers the language of computing as increasingly taking the place of Freudian psychology as a means of describing ourselves, as well as the implications of Freudian psychology as it impacts upon male and female interaction with objects in the world, particularly computer technology.

The relationship between humanity and computers as described in *"The Second Self"* has changed the nature of how we understand both living and inanimate objects – we project human traits onto computers and other objects, describing them as stubborn, reliable, angry, sad or hurt. This says a lot about our relationship with what we might define as "things" (i.e., inanimate objects in the outside world) and, by implication, our understanding of the "subject" and "object".

Not only do computers encourage us to redefine how we understand ourselves, but as technology changes we also understand the computers differently – an example here might be

the introduction of the Operating System. The Operating System is an interface which lies on top of the underlying code which allows the computer to function, it provides a more “user friendly” window through which to change the state of, and interact with, the computer rather than requiring the user to delve into the inevitably complex and esoteric code underneath. This change in interaction means that users become more disconnected from the feeling of handling the mechanisms of the computer directly, and so we are instead “asking” the computer to perform actions. This change in technology significantly alters the understanding of what a computer is – rather than a complex tool accessible by few, it can become a window into a complex world which allows experimentation, tinkering and bricolage (a term introduced by Levi-Strauss to refer to the difference between science in western and preliterate societies, *“where the former is the science of the abstract, and the latter a science of the concrete”* (Turkle, 1984:102). Bricolage refers to the act of experimentation and playfulness: working with a closed set of materials with the possibility of producing new and surprising results).

With her discussion of bricolage, Turkle engages with the idea of a feminine interaction with computer technology. She begins by describing, in depth, the nature of female and male understanding of technology as it develops from a very young age. Turkle uses Freudian psychology to describe the double separation of young boys from their mothers: first at birth, and second at the Oedipal stage when the father breaks up the fantasized fusional relationship between son and mother. Turkle argues that this double separation encourages a more “highly charged” objective understanding of the outside world in boys when compared to girls who, in turn, can maintain more elements of this fusional relationship with the mother and so have a less objective relationship with the outside world and objects. Women, therefore, are more likely to engage in “bricolage” as described in the previous paragraphs – they have a more playful and subjective understanding of objects (such as computers) and so can engage in play

and experimentation with them without necessarily having to engage with or understand the underlying processes which might produce the effects they are seeing. Whereas men are more likely to have a pragmatic relationship with objects – looking to understand how objects work, how they are put together and ultimately have an understanding which is based upon the use of an object. This point could be problematic, however, as it is shown today that the field of computer technology is still a largely male-dominated area, even in the more creative sectors of hacking and hacktivism.

The strength of Turkle's work lies in its discussion of this relationship between computers and humanity, rather than its discussion of how this relationship diffuses into the wider culture (Kaplan, 1986:873), and the book becomes of relevance to this review when she discusses the relationships between hacker culture and computers.

Turkle describes this relationship as defined by several features:

Firstly, the hacker is always outside of the system, but able to influence it – like Levy's "mistrust of authority", this idea of the hacker as an outsider is one which persists to contemporary hacktivism.

Next the hacker demonstrates a mastery over the system, this means they are extremely knowledgeable about the working of a potentially complex system, but are nevertheless able to influence it. Sometimes a hacker might carry out a hack simply to emphasise their prowess at hacking and so their mastery over the system. The example used by Turkle is that of a hacker "Captain Crunch" rerouting a phone line such that a call is sent around the world before reaching a handset across the room – to the layman this might seem a relatively mundane act,

but to other hackers with the technical know-how to comprehend the required skill to carry out such an act, this hack would appear to be an ultimate expression of mastery over the system.

Finally, Turkle discusses the idea that the act of writing code might produce, in hackers, a state of transcendental bliss. Sometimes they might write code for the sake of writing code – she describes hackers tapping out code on computers in an almost trance-like state, simply enjoying the experience of honing and demonstrating their craft.

This review began with the hacker ethic for a specific reason, because though the technology upon which this ethic was first understood to be built may change over time, the ethic can be traced right through to the contemporary phase of hacktivism.

The hacking as described in Turkle's and Levy's pieces of work is not, on its own, hacktivism, though it may be considered a progenitor for hacktivism. It is important to note that whilst the term "hacktivism" is not explicitly stated in these pieces of work, there are identifiable and salient threads of logic and meaning extending from the concepts mentioned in both pieces of literature which reach all the way to contemporary hacktivist groups such as Anonymous, Lulzsec and Antisec. It is these threads which I believe tie contemporary hacktivist activity to its hacker ethic roots, maintaining the relevance of this literature and contributing to the definition of these groups as social movements which display collective identities.

The focus on freedom of information in Levy's hacker ethic, and the idea of a hacker existing outside the system, but being able to influence the system as noted in Turkle are both prime examples of concepts attached to early hacking subculture which have persevered to contemporary hacktivist rhetoric.

2.9.2 Second Wave Hackers: Microserfs and Open Source as a Response

This section will focus on a push-and-pull between two competing ideologies within the hacker world, and the identities which attached to these ideologies: the co-option of skilled hackers into the corporate community by large companies such as Apple and Microsoft and the documentation of this process in the book “Microserfs” by Douglas Coupland. Second, the response to this seeming abandonment of the hacker ethic with the Open Source software movement, which sought to take back control of the product of hacking (software) by making it freely available to the public, rather than laboured with the corporate necessity of making software profitable. We will not dwell overly long on this topic, as whilst I believe it is important to understand this conflict to appreciate the roots of contemporary hacktivism I believe there are elements of the literature on this subject which begin to blend into the “Hacktivism and the Performance Politics” section which follows – such as the increasing focus on politically motivated code that emerged out of the open-source movement.

This section is titled “Second Wave Hackers” because Jordan and Taylor identified three groups of “first wave hackers” which were covered, broadly, in the section above: the “original hackers” who emerged in the early days of hacking, such as the hackers covered by Levy (1984) and Turkle (1984) working out of MIT in the mid to late 20th century. “Hardware hackers” who played a key role in disseminating personal computer technology at the beginning of the 1970s – Levy’s hardware hackers in California are an example of this and “Software hackers” who worked more with programs, attempting to iterate better and more efficient software to work on the hardware often hacked by their colleagues the hardware hackers. It is important to note that just because the “second wave” of hackers emerged as will be discussed in this section, it does not mean that this first wave has necessarily been disbanded or has died out. Simply that these new understandings of the term “hacker” emerged at this time, and must be addressed.

2.9.3 Hacktivism and the Performance of Politics

Jordan and Taylor's typology of hacker archetypes ends with what was, at the time, the modern-day hacktivist. "*Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?*" was published in 2004 and they place a significant amount of focus on anti-globalisation movements of that time, such as protests against the World Trade Organisation in 1999, and the Zapatista (and its digital counterpart) movement in Mexico in the 90s and early 2000s.

Jordan and Taylor begin their discussion of the hacktivist movement by detailing the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement. They discuss the development of a framework of understanding of protest following the Second World War which encompassed a great many different struggles. Whether it is the socio-economically focused class struggles of the Marxist-inspired labour politics, or the newer identity-politics struggles, each different movement engages with a very different opponent and any new politics which emerge must engage with this "*multiplicity of struggles*" (Jordan and Taylor, 2004:48). The outcome of this development was that even when the significantly class-defined conflicts which emerged during the 1980s and 90s (for example: the miner's strikes in England) began to make waves they "*did not return to class politics as the single framework for radical opposition*" (ibid, 2004:48), rather, these kinds of struggles were viewed as one element in a constellation of struggles and movements. This development occurred parallel to significant cultural changes – most notably, global communications networks allowed for the diffusion of US media across the globe (television, movies, music and video games for example) and whilst this process is not necessarily one way, as there is opportunity for the development of "local" cultures which reach global audiences in cyberspace, nevertheless it is increasingly the case that local cultures have come into contact with global media and information technology. These two important social

changes: the multiplicity of struggles and the proliferation of communication technology and global media are vital for the modern-day hacktivist movement.

Jordan and Taylor bring the discussion of anti-globalisation movements into the 1990s, where it begins to engage with modern internet technology as a tool for protest. Perhaps the most significant case from which they draw their examples is that of the Mexican “Zapatista” protests of the 1990s and early 2000s and the writing of Ricardo Dominguez – a member of the hacktivist group the Electronic Disturbance Theatre. The Zapatista movement was a conflict involving a guerrilla army which emerged in the 1990s in opposition to the neo-liberal-globalisation which was affecting Mexico at the time because of, in part, disagreements with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Zapatista movement garnered a significant amount of online support, both in Mexico and abroad, and Jordan and Taylor devote a great deal of focus on their use of, at the time, innovative protest techniques which embraced the powers of online activism. Early examples of Distributed Denial of Service operations using their “FloodNet” programs, virtual sit-ins and website defacement allowed the “Digital Zapatistas” to show support for their non-digital counterparts.

Jordan and Taylor attempt to place the Digital Zapatistas into a typology of hacktivists by splitting hacktivists and hacktivist activity into two opposing camps:

“Mass Action” hacktivism uses the internet’s capacity to gather great numbers of people to a cause to carry out disruptive online protest actions such as overloading servers, defacing websites or simply blocking outside access. The actions of the Digital Zapatistas flooding Mexican governmental websites with spurious requests for information such that they overload are an example of Mass Action hacktivism. These acts are necessarily disruptive to the

movement and proliferation of information.

“Digitally-correct” hacktivists ascribe to the ideal that information should flow freely, regardless of its content. Hacktivists who adhere to the digitally correct camp would disagree with the actions of the Mass Action hacktivists as they are disrupting the free flow of information. Digitally correct hacktivists would rather take a less combative approach and see their ends achieved through the creation of counter-information, as opposed to attempting to disrupt the opponent’s information stream itself.

The significance of Hacktivism, for Jordan and Taylor comes in its capacity to oppose “*the regressive globalization carried out by governments following a neo-liberal agenda*” (ibid, 2004:165). They argue that hacktivism is a “radical virus” for these “viral times” which draws in powerful alternative visions of society, arms them with informational tools and “injects” itself into twenty first century societies. They draw on the often online-published manifestos of hacktivism groups such as the “*Hacktivism FAQ*” produced by the Cult of the Dead Cow, or the “*Digital Zapatismo*” (1997) from Ricardo Dominguez of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre/Digital Zapatistas. Samuel (2004) argues that Jordan and Taylor’s reliance on these manifestos (which are particularly rhetorical, theoretical and theatrical) causes them to overemphasise the ideological purity and political ambition of the mass action hacktivists, and to underestimate such traits in the digitally correct hacktivists which, I believe this limitation may be due to their perception of these two ideas as observable categories in which to place hacktivists. Instead of seeing the two camps as two distinctive categories, it is perhaps more practical to view Mass Action and Digitally-Correct as two ends of a spectrum as, in practice, the actions of most groups fall somewhere in between the two camps. So, rather than trying to fit individuals or groups into one camp or the other, both camps should instead be thought of

as tools for analysis and used by way of comparison with entities in the real world. Indeed, groups which might at one-time act in a “digitally correct” manner may carry out acts which appear closer to the “mass action” camp so it may be more appropriate to understand each individual event as falling somewhere on a spectrum between Mass Action and Digitally-Correct and to appreciate that the actions of humans in the real world are unlikely to be consistently on one end of the spectrum or the other.

This chapter is concerning literature which addresses the social formations adopted by hacktivists, and Jordan and Taylor’s work provides not only a useful history of hacktivist culture from its earliest days, but also a comprehensive presentation of what were, at the time, contemporary hacktivist social formations (in the form of loosely connected anti-globalisation movements). Whilst their historical account of the development of hacker culture is useful, in terms of how their work is useful in understanding contemporary hacktivist cultures (i.e., since the emergence of grassroots activist groups such as Anonymous from 2008 onwards) there have been several societal and technological advances which have changed the understanding of hacktivism even within the past 10 years which mean that a fresh view on hacktivism must be drawn – Gabriella Coleman’s work on Anonymous provides a view on the most prominent hacktivist group since 2008.

2.9.4 Hacktivism and Grassroots Movements

This chapter has covered early hacker ethics, some of the earliest hackers understanding their trade as “tinkerers” or “experimenters”, and writers like Turkle and Levy seeing them as masters of, but ultimately outside of, the system. Early hackers were often anti-establishment, anti-capitalist and anti-centralist. We have also covered how, when suffused with a political message, this hacker ethic produced groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and the

Digital Zapatistas – groups which used theatricality and hacker techniques to fiddle with established systems for the purposes of activism. This chapter will now move onto the contemporary understanding of hacktivism, and the most oft seen symbol of anti-establishment hacktivism: Anonymous.

In 2005 New Media and Society published a three-article issue concerning the “*potent hybrid of computer technology and social activism*” which is Hacktivism. One article in this collection looked back: “*The moral ambiguity of social control in cyberspace: a retro-assessment of the ‘golden age’ of hacking*” by Jim Thomas (2005) is an examination of the late 1980s and early 1990s hacker culture and its interactions with law enforcement, it concludes that rather than debating whether the actions of the hackers under examination were right or wrong, the question should be where the line between the right and wrong lies, and how it is defended.

“*Hacking the body: code, performance and corporeality*” by Douglas Thomas, in contrast to Jim Thomas’ article, takes a more subjective stance on understanding the limits of hacking, and begins to look forward to the possibility of hacktivism to transcend these limits. Douglas Thomas argues that, by looking at hackers’ responses to state restrictions on the export of cryptography, it is revealed that there is a point at which the body becomes the “limit of code” and this marks it as irreducibly transgressive (ibid, 2005:1). Performance, in contrast to code, is corporeal and requires the body. It is this performance which holds the greatest possibility for hacktivism and resistance.

“*From hackers to hacktivists: speed bumps on the global superhighway?*” by Paul Taylor looks more in the present (as it was in 2005) at the advantages that hacktivism holds over hacking proper; hacking being plagued by so called “parasitical elements” which stifled more politically oriented goals, hacktivism, however, is much freer to explore these kinds of goals. Taylor concludes that a move from an understanding of human-technology relationships as networks

to webs as supporting new means of online solidarity and oppositional practices to global capital.

These articles, cumulatively, suggest that a successful hacktivist movement should attempt to engage with the placement of the line between right and wrong, it should consider performance as its most potent weapon (as opposed to code) and it should be comprised of new social formations which transcend the human-technology networks. Nearing the end of the decade, a new social movement would emerge to begin to engage with these ideas: the controversial hacktivist collective, Anonymous.

In 2008 Anonymous emerged into the public eye as a new hacktivist movement. Anonymous existed before 2008, but before this time most of their actions could be conceived of as pranks or internet “trolls” for example: organised raids on the social networking site “Habbo Hotel” and the denial of service attacks on the website of white supremacist radio broadcaster Hal Turner. The events of January 2008, however, could be considered the political birth of the movement with their organised campaign against the church of scientology. What follows here will be a synopsis of literature concerning the events which led to the emergence of Anonymous, which will serve as an introduction to some of the most important literature on the group – comprising mostly of the work of Gabriella Coleman, whose writing is perhaps the most extensive examination of Anonymous to date.

Gabriella Coleman is an anthropologist working at McGill University, Montreal. Coleman’s work consists of an extensive anthropological study of the emergence and presentation of Anonymous between 2008 and 2010. Coleman spent time observing and interacting with members of the hacktivist group on forums, IRC chat rooms and in person during a period of fervent activity within the group. She became well known to many members of Anonymous at

the time and developed a rapport with them; she has acknowledged that to a certain extent she became a broker of information between Anonymous and the media (Coleman in Isaacson, 2013).

Gabriella Coleman's work regarding Anonymous recognises that there is a wide array of individuals and groups of individuals involved in the movement, she describes them as: *"...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"* (Coleman, 2012). Primarily her early work on the subject focuses on the technologically proficient community which arose around the "political birth" of Anonymous in 2008. Much of her data is drawn from hours spent observing the IRC Channels which emerged to support the burgeoning Anonymous community at the time – she notes that during events (operations) it would not be unusual to have several thousand users logged into one channel, and new "rooms" would be created and deleted as meetings were set up and people siphoned off into their own private interchanges.

The hacktivist ethos which surrounds the community which Coleman describes is notably built upon the earlier work of well-known hacker groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and The Cult of the Dead Cow which were often significantly performative in their actions, but Coleman's main focus is on the new community of anonymous individuals arising during this time and the fact that though they are dramatically varied in demographics, there is a strong emphasis on hacker ethos and the power of technology.

It is this strong ethos on the power of technology which, Coleman argues, led to the birth of Anonymous and their early conflict with the church of Scientology. Anonymous' conflict with Scientology, and how that conflict continues to this day will be the subject of a later chapter –

but Coleman's examination of this conflict in its early stages concludes that the primary driving factor behind the movement against Scientology for Anonymous was that the church of Scientology would seem to be the antithesis of hacker and geek (and so by extension Anonymous) culture:

Where Anonymous are highly technologically proficient, the church of Scientology is vehemently anti-technology (or at least enforcing a very strict usage of technology). Where Anonymous are pro-freedom of speech, the church of Scientology would regularly seek to silence detractors or critics (through the deployment of an extensive legal team). In short, Scientology is a "perfect nemesis" for Anonymous, Coleman states that if there were such a thing as a "cultural inversion machine" and you placed the church of Scientology in one side, the result emerging from the other end might look very similar to Anonymous (Coleman, 2010).

Coleman's work on Anonymous has been invaluable not only as an academic investigation into a new cultural phenomenon, but it has also been a vital record of such a phenomenon in the context of the early days of its creation. That is to say that since Coleman's first publications on Anonymous around 2008-2010, the movement has changed dramatically in numerous ways. In Coleman's latest work: *"Hacker-Hoaxer-Whistleblower-Spy"* (2016) she guides the reader through the journey taken by Anonymous from its early days, but the book becomes ever more important once it begins to look at how Anonymous has changed since she started looking at the subject. Coleman discusses Anonymous' involvement with the Arab Spring and events in Tunisia, she brings in discussion on Anonymous' involvement with the Occupy movement (another grass-roots protest movement just like Anonymous). She details the methods by which Anonymous attacks are organised: focusing primarily upon IRC channels.

Some reviewers have again brought up the problem of Coleman's closeness to her subject material. Writing in the Guardian, Jamie Bartlett states that at times gives the impression that she would rather like to be a hacktivist herself:

“Yet she is often too present in her story, and the result is unnecessary detail (“I felt OK, but a little tired – certainly under-caffeinated”) or self-admiration. Coleman, who used the pseudonym Biella, quotes anons talking about her: “I don’t think she realises how much she’s contributed to Anonymous.” Later she documents a demonstration she attended, where “on seeing me, a pair of [anons] nodded. One gave me a thumbs up and told me to ‘keep up the good work’.”

(Bartlett, 2014)

Bartlett describes her language as betraying her bias: she describes the Anonymous mask as *“an eternal beacon, broadcasting the value of equality”*, Anonymous are *“contemporary trickster figures”* and their war on Scientology is *“poetic and inspirational”*. Bartlett implies that it is this bias which means that whilst many of the causes that Anonymous support are indeed ones which he feels *“things most of us support”*, Coleman pays little attention to the collateral damage which the movement causes with their actions. These accusations of bias are perhaps due to Coleman's closeness to the subject, this is both an advantage and a drawback of the very immersive method she chose to study the movement: it gave her perhaps unparalleled access as a researcher, uniquely placing her at the epicentre of the movement in its most active period. Being in such a privileged position at the right time gives her work a primacy which is very difficult to replicate.

Coleman's work focuses on the dramatically active IRC channels which emerged around the genesis of Anonymous in 2008-2010, but there are other areas of the internet and the wider world which display Anonymous activity. Certainly, Coleman also acknowledges the infamous imageboard "4chan" as another area of interest, but her attention is quickly drawn from this space once the IRC channels begin to become more popular as a nucleus of action. Writers have also addressed other sites of Anonymous activity: Michael Wesch and the Digital Ethnography Class of Spring 2009, focus solely upon 4chan as the prime space for Anonymous activity (2012). They explain that 4chan is a "modest no-frills image board" and, in comparison to many other social websites which focus on privacy management, modes of communication and media sharing, 4chan is rather simple. Users can Anonymously post images accompanied by text and other users can respond with text or images of their own. The website is split into a multitude of themed "boards" but the one which Wesch et al focus upon is the "random" board called "/b/". Wesch notes the numerous pitfalls and difficulties associated with researching in such a space – upon visiting the site his computer immediately warned him that it had contracted a virus, for example. Additionally, due to the relatively unmoderated nature of the content on /b/ some of his students found it distasteful to spend time researching it, and within a few weeks only two of his students were willing to spend their time on the site conducting data collection for the research.

Wesch first focuses on the presentation of identity within the Anonymous community on /b/, he notes their propensity to reject all individuals who seek to make a name for themselves or else single themselves out for attention as this would run contrary to their anti-hierarchical ethos – he does note, however, that Gabriella Coleman was exempt from this particular rule, as she had strong contacts within the group who could vouch for her. Any user who attempts to draw attention to themselves is viciously mocked and accused of "namefagging" (adding the colloquial suffix "fag" to the end of words is a common trope on 4chan, for example:

“samefags” who post a reply to their own image, pretending to be someone else). In fact, according to Wesch, Anonymous reject all labels applied to them (e.g. “community”, “group” or “culture” etc.): *“Anonymous is not a person, nor is it a group, movement or cause: Anonymous is ... a commune of human thought and useless imagery”* (Landers, 2010). Wesch uses this conclusion as a spring-board to go on to talk about the literature concerning culture in the digital age and “the end of identity” and ultimately, he concludes that Anonymous are *“adept manipulators in the online mediascape”* (Wesch, 2012:12) and that they challenge and subvert our basic assumptions about identity, community, groups and *“sociality itself”* by making it a joke. Wesch is arguing that by rejecting all labels applied to their social formation Anonymous highlights the innate absurdity and fragility of said labels.

Wesch's work is based primarily upon 4chan and /b/ and whilst these are vibrant communities which certainly played a large role in the formation of Anonymous – writers such as Coleman have shown that they were not perhaps the central hub of Anonymous activity even in 2008. Wesch captures the volatile and challenging nature of approaching Anonymous as a subject of study, but by primarily focusing upon 4chan as a source of observable data on Anonymous he severely limits the scope of his possible conclusions: /b/ may well have been the progenitor of much of what would become Anonymous, but once actions such as the various hacks were being organised it would have made a poor tool for planning or operational activities due to the transient nature of communication on the site. The IRC chat channels (and the private rooms observed by Coleman (2010)) would make perhaps for more appropriate sites for the planning activities which led to much of the public actions of Anonymous even in 2008 when the movement was still in its infancy. Additionally, I believe there are two limitations of Wesch's work: first, he intentionally skips the question of definition when he claims that *“Anonymous is not a person, movement or cause: Anonymous is... a commune of human thought and useless imagery”* by dismissing the question of definition and instead retreating to a vague description

of “*a commune of human thought and useless imagery*” Wesch shies away from the difficult questions in favour of more readily observable ones (i.e., ignoring the *what* and skipping straight to the *how*, *when*, *who* and *where*). Anonymous' intentional rejection of these labels does not preclude their academic application to their movement. It is this difficult question of definition that I intend to engage with during this thesis.

This literature review has comprised of two main pools of literature: that concerning social movements and that concerning hacking and hacktivism. It was important to first concern ourselves with literature regarding hacking and hacktivism because the intent was to identify the relevant literature in the academic discipline and then to identify within that literature a space for my project. I sought to provide a chronological view of works about hacking and hacktivism to show the foundations upon which much of contemporary hacktivist movements are built, and how there are definable threads which can be drawn from the early days of hacking literature with Levy and Turkle through to modern interpretations of hacktivist groups such as Anonymous with Coleman and Wesch's work. What I wanted to emphasise, however, is the difficulties which present themselves when trying to define Anonymous, they are ephemeral, dynamic, ever changing and seem to actively resist definition – so often literature does not fully get to grips with the question of what we might define them as. Throughout the course of this project I myself have tried various definitions such as collective identities, communities and networks but ultimately, I found that the most useful definition was that of a “social movement”. I have demonstrated that much of the literature concerning hacktivism focused far more upon the substantive questions of *how*, *why*, *where* and *who* with regards to the various elements of the phenomenon, and skipped the formative question of exactly *what* we can understand hacktivism and, by extension, Anonymous (as an example of modern hacktivism) to be.

Following this examination of hacking and hacktivism literature it was important to place the

following thesis into a paradigmatic structure – that is social movements. So, I brought together several competing definitions of social movements: from collective behaviour, resource mobilization theory and new social movements. I ultimately presented Diani's amalgamated definition of a social movement as the one which I thought to be most appropriate to Anonymous – and the rest of this thesis will be concerned with presenting the data I have gathered which supports this conclusion.

2.9.5 A brief timeline of Anonymous Activity

The following section will serve to detail the periods in Anonymous history. It is by no means an exhaustive list of all Anonymous-related activity, not least because a substantive portion of such activity may well be unreported. Instead it should be considered an effort to place in historical context the rest of the conclusions drawn in this thesis, and bring into sharper contrast the nature of the conclusions drawn from the data collected:

Pre-2008 – Pool's Closed

Even before they became a player in the political sphere, Anonymous were already making headlines as potentially dangerous internet pranksters. Fox dubbed them “the Internet Hate Machine” and “Hackers on Steroids” for their activity during this time (Fox News, 2009). It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Anonymous moniker became attached to this tricksterism and mischievousness; the “Pool's Closed” raids on the social media platform Habbo Hotel were as early as 2006 (in response to alleged racist comments made by site moderators), and Anonymous were involved in targeting white supremacist radio show host Hal Turner in late

2006 and early 2007 (Palin, 2008:<https://www.wired.com/2008/09/palin-hacker-gr-2/>). In 2008, Anonymous were also implicated on a famous troll of Oprah Winfrey: nicknamed “Over 9000 Penises” this troll involved convincing moderators on Oprah’s messaging boards that an Anonymous poster was responsible for a child exploitation ring – spurring Winfrey to read the clearly “lulzy” message (laced with Anonymous slogans and references to pop culture) on national television (Adams, 2008: <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-93559>).

This was much of the early existence of Anonymous – finding ways to “push peoples’ buttons”, finding the most effective way to infuriation and produce the most sought-after commodity in Anonymous culture: lulz.

2008-2010 – Project Chanology

Early in 2008 members of Anonymous became aware of the suppression of the video of an interview with actor Tom Cruise discussing his involvement with the church of Scientology. The church of Scientology sought to take legal action against the website Gawker to have them remove the video from circulation. In response, members of the Anonymous movement protested outside Scientology locations, sent sheets of black paper to scientology printers inside these buildings and arranged for large numbers of pizza to be delivered to scientology locations across the US and Europe (Coleman, 2013). This was the first large-scale, real life Anonymous protest and it spurred the creation of a new protest entity which would grow over the coming years. This was also the first known use of the white V mask in connection to Anonymous, rather than just as a symbol of 4chan.org, hitherto the symbol of Anonymous had been a faceless man wearing a suit. These protests, both online and offline, would become known as Project Chanology.

In “Anonymous in Context: The Politics and Power Behind the Mask” Coleman (2013) argues that this emergence into the political sphere caused a lot of debate amongst long-standing

members of the movement as to whether Anonymous should engage in more earnest protests such as those associated with Project Chanology, or whether they should focus upon irreverent action, trolling and “remain faithful to its madcap roots” (ibid, 2013:5).

Nevertheless, Project Chanology signalled a change in tack with regards to Anonymous’ intentions for those that did want to pursue more sincere protest. There were other Anonymous-linked activities during this time, such as an involvement with the protest against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran following accusations of rigged elections in 2009, but I believe Chanology remains the defining protest of this period.

2010-2012 – Operation Payback, Titstorm and OpSony

The period of time between 2010 and 2012 featured a ramping up of Anonymous activity, but it is defined, I believe, by a trio of protests each with interlinking motivations: Operation Payback (and Operation Avenge Assange), Operation Titstorm and OpSony. These Operations, in contrast to Project Chanology, employed more the more aggressive DDOS tactics which had fell out of favour within Chanology (Coleman, 2013:6).

Early in 2010, Bollywood publishers hired Indian IT firm Aiplex Software to launch DDOS attacks on websites who did not respond to takedown requests. In response, Anonymous, too, launched DDOS attacks against entertainment producers in protest – this was the beginning of Operation Payback. In December 2010 the infamous document archive website Wikileaks came under significant pressure from several sources to cease publishing secret US diplomatic cables. Many companies upon which Wikileaks relied withdrew their support for the site: PayPal, Mastercard and Visa were involved in the collection of donations for the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Anonymous saw this as an attempt to curtail freedom of speech, and

so as a response launched Operation Avenge Assange, a second front of Operation Payback – targeting the web infrastructure of these companies.

In February 2010, in response to attempts by the Australian government to restrict access to certain types of pornography, Anonymous launched Operation Titstorm, a series of DDoS attacks on the Australian government. Stating *“No government should have the right to refuse its citizens access to information solely because they perceive it to be unwanted”* and *“the Australian government will learn that one does not mess with our porn”* (Cheng, 2010) – Anonymous’ penchant for the irreverent had not been lost.

The final protest of the trio is OpSony, a response by Anonymous to tech giant Sony’s attempts to take legal action against George Hotz – a software hacker known as GeoHot. Hotz, alongside other hackers, had successfully broken into the Playstation 3’s code, and this had drawn the ire of Sony Corporation and their legal team. When Sony launched legal actions against Hotz, and another hacker Alexander Egorenkov, the anonymous-offshoot Lulzsec, brought down their Playstation Network system for a number of days through a series of attacks which also resulted in a large amount of information being stolen.

These three operations: Payback, Titstorm and OpSony are similar in that they signify an intent for Anonymous to step-up the size of their targets.

It is also important to note Anonymous’ involvement with the Arab Spring movement in 2011, having a hand in revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan and Morocco – showing their support via awareness spreading, DDoS-ing governmental websites and revealing the email addresses and passwords of numerous governmental officials (“[prolog]prof – Pastebin.com”, 2011)

Between 2012 and 2014 was a tumultuous time for Anonymous. 2012 alone saw a great many individual Operations take place: Operations focussed upon governmental websites in countries as diverse as Mexico, Nigeria, China, Japan, Syria and Russia, as well as Operations targeting the US Federal Reserve, Interpol, the cybersecurity company Symantec, as well as claims that the group would target the NSA in response to the sentencing of prominent computer hacker Jeremy Hammond at the end of 2013 (<https://www.hackread.com/anonymous-launches-global-cyber-war-on-u-s-government/>, 2013).

By this time, much of Anonymous activity had become more diffuse than simply being centred around the Internet Relay Chats which drove much of the earlier Project Chanology and Operation Payback coordination. Much activity now was taken off-site, into less publicly accessible areas – whereas the push for “awareness spreading” as a valid method of sharing the Anonymous message, and bringing new members into the movement, was beginning to take hold.

5th November 2013 was also the date of the first Million Mask March, an event which will be covered in much more detail in Chapter 4.

In addition to the great amount of Anonymous activity, there were also set-backs for the movement: the unmasking of Hector Xavier Monsegur (a prominent hacker going by the alias “Sabu”) in March 2012, caused a great deal of uncertainty amongst Anonymous groups – though an Anonymous-affiliated twitter feed reacted to the revelation: “#Anonymous is a hydra, cut off one head and we grow two back” (Covert, 2012: <https://gizmodo.com/5890961/anonymous-reacts-to-sabus-betrayal-of-lulzsec>). Sabu was revealed to be an informant for the FBI, working as part of a plea deal related to his earlier arrest.

The data collection for this project began during the summer of 2013, and the rest of this thesis will be an examination of the state of Anonymous as observed during this time. It is a period in Anonymous' history where the tight-knit community which emerged out of the early "pool's closed" raids and Project Chanology has become significantly more diffuse across several platforms.

3.0 Methods, Methodology and Ethics

This chapter will cover a summary of the methods, the motivations for the choice of these methods and the ethical and practical considerations which went into the development, data collection and data analysis during this project. This thesis is a presentation of the data collected and the meanings which can be drawn from said data, but it is also the story of the project as it played out. What follows here is a guide to the journey that this project has taken from inception through to conclusion, where possible I will attempt to show the challenges which were faced along the road and how we sought to overcome them.

3.1 Summary and Introduction to the Methodology

The first point which had to be considered when approaching the data collection stage of the project was which methods to choose to best capture the nature of a group such as Anonymous. Anonymous is a movement which is notoriously suspicious of outside attention, and they can appear hostile, chaotic and directionless at first glance. Similarly, the very nature of the autonomous and anti-hierarchical composition of the movement is such that they can appear indistinct, difficult to pin down and diffuse. If I were attempting to conduct research on a company I might go to the website, visit the headquarters and speak to managers in their offices and observe employees at their work stations. Anonymous has no official website, no headquarters and no definitive membership list so the question then became:

How best to examine a movement which is suspicious of outside attention, diffuse in nature and has no identifiable hierarchy, headquarters (either online or offline) or membership list?

To answer this question, I first had to consider my ontological leanings when it comes to the production of research data, and the type of information I was hoping to gather: Anonymous might exist primarily as an online entity, and it might function in conjunction with a great deal

of computer technology, but ultimately it is a movement driven by the actions of people – whether they are acting alone or alongside others. To appropriately capture the nature of such a movement, I strongly feel that it is important to engage with the individuals who are involved with the Anonymous movement, as opposed to simply studying from afar or attempting to quantify and represent the movement through statistics or numbers (such as frequency of attacks, predictions on participants etc.). Rather, a more qualitative approach to the data collection was chosen, such that I could engage directly with the actors involved and produce a picture of the movement as seen from the perspective of its participants. The reasons for this approach will be justified further in this text.

What follows here is a summary of the method by which I collected most of my data, this will be followed by a more in-depth examination of why I chose each method particularly and how exactly each method was applied to each site.

A useful resource for understanding how to academically approach Anonymous is Gabriella Coleman's extensive study of Anonymous from 2008 to 2015. In her examination of Anonymous, Gabriella Coleman (2010) describes them as a network of loosely connected nodes. These nodes are areas of the internet and wider world where members of Anonymous would congregate. Some nodes are larger than others (i.e. consisting of more individual contributors and possessing more linkages to other nodes); these nodes are not necessarily constant over time: some nodes rise around particular operations and then begin to wane after a while, whilst others are less transient and persist over longer periods of time.

I began by identifying several important nodes (i.e. centres of significant congregation – forums, chatrooms and websites) as starting points. The first task would be to observe these nodes; the purpose of this observation phase was two-fold:

- 1) As an academic exercise, the observation phase served as a data collection tool in and of itself. The intention being to conduct a thorough ethnographic observation study of each site.
- 2) As a methodological tool, through which I could gain a greater understanding of how the community operates, which methods might be appropriate for approaching community participants for interviews and to inform potential questions to ask during these interviews.

Following this period of observation, certain specifically chosen communities were approached to participate in a set of interviews. Some participants were happy to engage in public discussion with myself and other members of the community through threads and instant messaging chat on the sites themselves, whereas others preferred to speak to me directly through either email or via a private messaging service. All interviews were semi structured, with a short set of questions brought by myself, but allowing for both parties to explore other subjects if pertinent questions arose from the process.

3.2 Methodology

In this project, my intention has been to examine the smaller scale interactions between the individuals involved in this movement, rather than looking at the broader strokes which Anonymous may make.

My belief that it is social interaction which comprises social life led me towards the use of qualitative data collection techniques, and the methodology I chose was ethnography. Ethnography is an approach to research which encourages immersion in the subject population and the documentation of the minutiae of the day-to-day existence of the informants within that population. Rather than a specific method in and of itself (such as observation, interviews,

statistical analysis or case studies), ethnography is a way of engaging with a research task at every stage of the process – from study design, through selecting sites for study, data collection, analysis and eventually the write up of the ethnography itself. With ethnography, rather than a data collection method, it is perhaps more appropriate to understand that it is: “...*socio-cultural interpretation that sets it apart from other forms of qualitative inquiry. Ethnography is not defined by how data are collected, but by the lens through which the data are interpreted*” (Merriam and Associates, 2002). The ethnographer should approach the subject without any prior hypothesis such that they might avoid influencing the interpretation of the observed phenomena – and they should remain open to the conclusions which emerge from the data collected. Spindler and Hammond (2000:39-48) describe the characteristics of thorough and appropriate ethnography:

- 1) Extended participant observation.
- 2) Spending a lot time at the site.
- 3) Collecting a large amount of data across several formats (physical notes, artefacts, audio, video etc).
- 4) Openness – such that the researcher has no specific hypothesis they are seeking to prove or disprove, and avoids highly specific features of the study sites upon which they are looking to focus.

I sought to incorporate these elements into my method by conducting my studies over a long period of time, choosing specific sites such that I might focus on each research site extensively, collecting a large amount of data (this was particularly important due to the online nature of

much of my research sites, and the heterogeneous nature of much of the data I collected – an issue which will be addressed later in this chapter) and by remaining open to engaging with new ideas as they emerge from the data and remaining academically reflexive such that I was mindful of my own place within the research site, and the effects that it might have on the subjects within each site.

3.3 Realist Ethnography

There are a number of approaches which a researcher might consider when carrying out an ethnography: for example, the critical ethnography approach (Carspecken, 1995; Thomas, 1993) is where the researcher seeks to advocate a certain stance on the subject of their study, it is typically carried out where the researcher is looking to advocate emancipation of certain marginalised groups in society, and the ethnography itself is a means by which they might highlight inequality and domination (Carspecken and Apple, 1992). In contrast, a realist ethnography seeks only to represent the phenomenon as accurately as possible. The point of the process in this case is to objectively report data as collected from participants at the research sites and to produce a descriptive and normative representation of the subject culture under examination. The ethnographer, using a realist approach, reports their findings as an omniscient reporter of facts, rather than presenting their own opinions or feelings with regards to their findings. The ethnographer's report should be free from personal bias, judgement or political goals.

As will be discussed in more detail in the ethical considerations section of this chapter, there were several potential challenges which were highlighted before even this project got off the ground and many of these challenges influenced which ethnographic approach this project would seek to employ. The subject population can be relatively suspicious or even hostile towards outside attention, particularly towards the media, but also towards academic interest.

Equally, they are a contentious group which is regularly linked with illegal activity including but not limited to hacking, theft of personal information and leaking of stolen confidential documentation – as such, when considering the potential ethnographic approach this project would seek to take, I decided that it would have been inappropriate to set out to produce a “critical” ethnography. A critical ethnography, in the case of this subject population would encourage me to take a stance on potentially illegal activities carried out by the participants in this study, and I thought that this might put myself in a compromising situation if the data collected led me to be in either support of, or opposition to, past or future criminal activity carried out by my participants. Instead, I endeavoured to maintain an objective standpoint with regards to the subject population – such that I might accurately represent the data collected, but avoid situations of advocacy which might bring into question my academic objectivity. This stance was made explicit to participants in the study at the outset of the data collection process. Typically, the bulk of the data collection during an ethnography occurs as participant observation. Sites are selected, and the researcher immerses themselves as much as possible and as much as is appropriate in the culture of the subject population. This closeness to the subject allows the ethnographer to produce dense and semantically-rich observations of the cultural patterns, shared group behaviours and beliefs of the subject population as well as gaining insight into other more practical features such as language, social structure and hierarchy, artefacts and tools. In this project, the bulk of the data was collected in online forums, chat rooms and social media feeds – the digital nature of the research sites required certain elements of traditional ethnography to be updated to compensate for the specific spaces in which the subjects of the study resided. My methodology, then, can be thought of as “cyber-ethnography” - an approach which attempts to apply the traditional tenets of ethnographic research to the online-realm, adapting them in the process. This meant, in practice, that where a traditional ethnography might require an ethnographer to travel in person to the place in which

they wish to observe their subject population, as a cyber-ethnographer my main sites of observation were digital – existing solely on the internet and whilst this cut out a number of the practical difficulties in gaining physical access to a population, it also raised its own list of potential challenges with regards to accessing and studying online populations. The practicalities of identifying appropriate sites for cyber ethnography can be challenging, as can actually carrying out the data collection itself, and the online-nature of the data (and the particular intricacies and idiosyncrasies of this kind of data) must be taken into account during the reporting of the outcome of the ethnography but I will cover these particular challenges in later chapters on those particular topics, but suffice it here to say that cyber-ethnography was the most appropriate means through which to approach this particular research population. As has already been discussed, accessing the Anonymous population can be challenging because they are relatively suspicious of outside attention, and they guard their personal information very closely. As such, employing traditional ethnographic methods such as in-person participant observation would not only be relatively impractical as many of the population are very geographically diverse and spread across the globe but perhaps even impossible, as it is unlikely that members of Anonymous would agree to release such personal information as their home address or even their real name to a researcher about whom they know very little.

The ethnographic approach to data collection encourages the researcher to approach the subjects a-theoretically and so the intention is to immerse oneself in the culture, and allow data to emerge from the observation of said culture, rather than approaching the subject with a hypothesis the researcher intends to investigate and so structuring the data collection method around proving or disproving this hypothesis. In this vein, semi-structured interviews allow the participants to express their own opinions, rather than choosing from a pre-set selection of potential responses. These approaches naturally give greater power to the subject population to shape the impression of the researcher, and the responses given are likely to be unique to the

individual in the situation. The kinds of data produced by these methods are dense and rich in subjective meaning as the answers are personal to the participant who gave them and the exact same answers are unlikely to be given by another participant. Analysis of this data, then, is not a simple task of tallying up numbers and comparing values, rather it involves a thematic analysis and attempting to develop an understanding of what the cumulative meaning of the responses might indicate, as well as maintaining an appreciation that each response has significance on its own. Each response or observation is an expression of a thought, a feeling, an opinion or a record of a single interaction, confrontation or negotiation and that has meaning in and of itself and so I had to consider the meaning of each response individually as well as part of a wider impression of the Anonymous community.

There are limitations of qualitative approaches. By getting closer to the data, these qualitative approaches produce far more subjective responses – it is unlikely that another researcher would be able to recreate the exact scenario in which the data was originally captured, so assertions of reliability and replicability are problematic. As are assertions of generalisability; as will be discussed later in this dissertation; one of the first patterns which began to emerge from the data was an indication that the population was far more varied than it might have first appeared – so this lack of generalisability between the different Anonymous-related communities was taken into consideration from the start, and was in-fact woven into the conclusions drawn at the end of the thesis.

3.4 Ethnographic Observation

As mentioned above, ethnography is the systematic study of people and culture through the viewpoint of the subject or subjects of study.

In this project, the subjects in question were members of the hacktivist community called “Anonymous”. After gaining ethical approval to commence the project, what followed was a

two-year study of various Anonymous communities – this involved several different approaches to the subject of study, whether that was simply observation or a more involved direct interaction with subjects. Both online and offline methods were employed to gain access to the research population.

3.4.1 Online:

Much of the data produced as part of this study came from the online portion of data collection. Anonymous is a primarily online-facing community, it emerged from an up-swell of interest in internet politics, and for the most part it remains a largely online entity – so naturally the internet was necessarily going to be the main arena for my data collection. Each different data collection site had different requirements for access, so the first task as an outsider was to meet these requirements.

For example, a site where a lot of observation took place was the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels; most notably one named “#AnonOps”. IRC channels may require a user to download computer programs through which they can gain access, alternatively there are web-applications which can be accessed through a browser which offer less functionality but are simpler to operate. The #AnonOps IRC requires users to sign in with a username (but no password initially) – but if the user wants to “claim” the name through which they were communicating, then a specific set of commands had to be typed into the chat box, which would log their request with the message server – if they did not claim their username within a certain period after logging in, then their username would revert to “guest” for that session. Users can reserve their username, if it has not already been claimed by another user, through another set of commands – this process requires the user to choose a password and input an email address (though the #AnonOps Frequently Asked Questions section suggested using a fake email address for this part of the process). This username is then reserved for three

months, and each time the user logs in they must complete a similar process of identifying themselves with this username.

By contrast, to access the “Why We Protest” Anonymous forum, no account was required (though users are required to create an account if they are to contribute to discussions). The administrators at Why We Protest had recently opted to cease supporting anonymised or guest contributions (where a user could contribute to discussion without having to create an account), this was due to an increase in spam and bot posts on the forums. To create an account on Why We Protest, the user is required to input a valid email address, username and password. Unlike the IRC channels, users cannot simply input a fake email address as they are required to validate their account before they can contribute. So – different sites had different technical requirements for access.

Once access was gained, the main bulk of the data collection of online communities consisted of observing communities without directly interacting with users for research purposes (sometimes interaction was required with administrators to be gain access to the forum, or posting privileges). Initially this was due to the time between ethical approval given to commence observations and the later application which approved direct interviews with Anonymous members, however, I also believe that by remaining a silent observer I could gain a good understanding of the day-to-day interactions of users on the sites without them altering their activity because they are aware that a researcher was taking notes. All the research sites I observed are publicly accessible forums, participants were aware that their interactions were in the public domain. In fact, most participants expected that their interactions were being recorded by either governmental or private agencies. For example, it is common on the WhyWeProtest forum to acknowledge that agents working for the church of Scientology would post misinformation and attempt to defame the site because of members of the forums past conflicts with the organisation and users on the IRC channels

would mock users who did not use VPN or IP-masking browsers when using the channels, because they believed it was foolish not to consider that their interactions were being observed.

Extensive notes were kept relating to each site of data collection. Due to remote nature of observing sites on the internet it would not be unusual for me to spend time observing numerous sites across one day.

The objective of the observation phase of the study was not just academic. I also used this time to determine appropriate communities for me to conduct interviews. There were three features I looked for in a community which would qualify it for the interview stage of the study:

- 1) They must be a site with regular and recent activity. I encountered numerous defunct forums; ones which sprung up around issues but now only exist as relics of the enthusiasm which once drove the cause forward. Whilst these were interesting insights into the community at the time, I needed sites where people were still interacting, discussing and debating to encourage either vibrant group conversations or at least give myself the best chance to find individuals willing to speak to me directly.
- 2) They must be a site with identifiable boundaries. Some Anonymous related social media feeds such as Anon-related Twitter accounts (such as AnonUK: <https://twitter.com/anonuk>) or Facebook feeds (such as OffiziellAnonymousPage: <https://www.facebook.com/OffiziellAnonymousPage/>) have regular interactions, recent activity and are related to Anonymous and so they might appear to be ideal for this kind of research. The community surrounding these feeds, however, is particularly nebulous and transient and so it is very difficult to define the *boundaries*

of the community. If, for example, someone replies to a tweet by @YourAnonNews (one of the largest Anonymous related twitter feeds) you might reasonably consider them to be part of the network of individuals associated with that feed, but if someone then retweets the tweet from this user's feed, should they be considered part of the same community? How many steps away from the original twitter feed should I go before choosing to draw the line between "in" the community or "out" the community? I needed sites where the discussion was self-contained and the intention to participate with the site was explicit and overt. This tended to mean that traditional forums (where a user creates an account to specifically interact with other users in on the site, threads are created on the site and discussion is limited to posts and replies to posts within the forum) or focused chat-rooms such as the IRC channels were more practically manageable as research sites.

- 3) They must be explicitly Anonymous-related. There are innumerable online-activist related sites on the internet, some appear very like Anonymous, some are even affiliated with Anonymous, but unless the site is explicit in its relation to Anonymous-related subject matter then I did not consider them for the study. An example here might be the group of sites affiliated with the Turkish Marxist/Leninist computer hacker group RedHack: often their intentions align with Anonymous operations, I have observed them at the Million Mask March in London which is an Anonymous-run event, but they are a separate entity and so should not be considered the subject of this study.

I only chose to approach a community once I had spent a significant amount of time observing them. This usually meant 2-3 weeks of regular observations, paying particular

attention to how they react to outside attention, how they deal with media and academics and what is the general tone of conversation which seems to illicit the most vibrant conversation. Extremely quickly after beginning to observe some of the better attended Anonymous communities it became very clear that academic and media approach is in no way a scarce occurrence. Most forums would get at least one student or academic approaching the community with varying degrees of preparedness each month. Often the students would be high school or undergraduate level, looking to complete a paper or essay and attempting to engage with the community to do so – my own approach would be one of many over the years Anonymous has existed so I always made sure that I had fully prepared myself for the responses when I did so.

Almost without exception an initial approach for research participation would be met with the same or similar response – one which could be boiled down to the popular forum and internet colloquial “*lurk moar*” (“moar” being a bastardisation of “more”) – roughly translated to “*spend more time watching and learning before engaging with us*”. Each community's response would be different in several ways, but almost unilaterally they began by questioning my preparedness for approaching them. Take, for example, my initial approach to an Anonymous-themed Reddit board (the following passage, like much of the data in this thesis, is very explicit, but to appreciate the language employed by Anonymous members I believe it is necessary to view it unaltered):

“Is this like the autism questions I get asked every week in other subreddits? They are fun. I have prepared my answers to your questionnaire in advance, to assist you finish your analysis / thesis / high school civics class report for monday.

Q1. KILL ALL HUMANS

Q2. DIE NORMIE SCUM

Q3. I TELL PEOPLE XENU IS NOT REAL BECAUSE I KNOW IT PISSES HIM OFF

LOLOLOLOLOL. MEMES MATTER. BAD MEMES MUST DIE. XENU IS A BAD MEME.

Q4. SJW'S ARE FAGG0RTZ. LIKE GAY BEFORE GAY WAS COOL LEVEL FAGGOTZ.

Q5. TOTALLY NOT A VIRGIN. NUHH UHH.

Q6. GEOGRAPHIC OR NATIONALISTIC ATTACHMENTS TO ANONYMOUS IS NON

ANONYMOUS. ITS JUST CO-OPTING THE NAME FOR YOUR BULLSHIT SMALL DICK

NO ONE GIVES A TOSS AGENDA. NO IDENTITY MEANS NO IDENTITY. NO EGO. NO NATIONALITY.

Q7. THERE ARE NO GRILS. FULL STOP. WHAT THE HELL IS THIS DIVERSITY SHIT ON ABOUT?

Q8. MASKS ARE EASILY DEFEATED PHYSICAL SECURITY. OBFUSCATION IS

GENERALLY A REALLY DUMB FORM OF INFO SEC ESPECIALLY WHEN UNDER THREAT FROM AN ORGANISATION WITH SUPERIOR RESOURCES.

Q9. IF THE PRO-PORTED CAUSE OF AN OP IS ABOUT PEOPLE AND BEING HUMAN AND SENSITIVE, THE OP IS BULLSHIT UNLESS ITS A BULLSHIT OP OPERATING AS COVER FOR A REAL OP. YES I AM SORRY YOU LIVE IN A THIRD WORLD FUCKHOLE OR AMERICA AND GRAVE CORRUPTION SEXISM AND RAMPART FASHION CRIMES ARE RUINING YOUR LIFE BUT FIXING THAT IS NOT WHAT ANONYMOUS WAS EVER ABOUT. GOOD LUCK WITH THAT.

Q10. ANONYMOUS IS ACTUALLY A MEME BASED FORM OF DDOS TO TURN PEOPLE INTO A BOTNET. ITS KINDA SMART REALLY.

Note. This poster is not part of anonymous and is just posting random opinions for your upvotes OR even sweeter sweeter tears and cries of how wrong, insulting and hurtful this post is. Poster also owns several Guy Fawkes masks and has posed in them on Facebook,

including with a bad coffee from a cafe titled "WE DO NOT FORGIVE, WE DO NOT FORGET". This anonymous shit is serious business.

Also once said some mildly insulting stuff in a jovial flame war manner on this subreddit and within an hour or so was doxxed, inferred they had found a LOT of shit and also had called home number. That was cool. So can confirm at least one person on this subreddit is a little legit.

Hope this helps."

The initial gut response when receiving such a vitriolic diatribe might reasonably be indignation, dismissal or perhaps a feeling of hopelessness – if this is going to be the response, how am I going to get any usable data out of this community? This kind of reply, however, is typical of Anonymous' response to any attention which attempts to take them seriously – it is mocking and obviously meant to belittle and offend, but it should not be taken personally and it should certainly not be responded with an equal measure of vitriol. To do so would engage the user in an argument which the researcher is unalterably doomed to lose – they are outnumbered: as a single researcher approaching a well-established community of people, and outgunned: insofar as the researcher is requesting something from the community and so they may choose whether they wish to supply it. A response in kind is exactly the sort of reaction Anons would savour, because that would be a victory and the researcher would be made to look the fool – this is a feature of the "troll" nature of Anonymous which will be covered in more detail in a later chapter, but suffice it to say here that a different tact proved to be far more effective.

Take, as another example, the response given to the initial approach to the WhyWeProtest (WWP) board:

“Are you doing anecdotal / qualitative research only?”

Your Ph.D. dissertation surely can't be "What I read on the Internet and learned after talking to a few people who wouldn't tell me their names."

What is/are your hypothesis/-ses?

What's your data collection / analysis plan?

SRSLY, dude.”

This response was less dripping with sarcasm and foul-language than the first one, but no less dismissive. In situations such as the above I found that the most effective course of action was to engage with the user to show that I had “done my homework”, I had a plan with regards to how the research would play out and was not coming into this engagement unprepared. To put it bluntly, it was a process of building up at least a base level of respect – acknowledging that this is likely not their first engagement with a researcher, but remaining confident that I was not just here for a *“high school civics class report for Monday”* rather my intention was (and is) to accurately represent the movement when they are so oft misrepresented and I intended to do so through an academically rigorous research process. In practical terms, this often meant being ready to answer questions about my research process, method, data collection and analysis, as well as referring to literature I’d read and, in turn, being pointed towards literature I should read. With regards to the above commenter from WWP, once I had answered her questions to a satisfactory extent she posted:

“Grasshopper, your orals are going well.

I'd be happy to be interviewed. However, there are some topics and questions I would discuss privately that I won't say in public forums.”

Once this initial engagement was passed, there often followed a back and forth of questions and answers. In keeping with a flexible approach, I was willing to engage with the community in whatever manner they deemed appropriate. For most communities, this meant taking a loose group conversation-like approach where I could field questions to the users of the forum through the thread and they would respond. I could then follow up with questions based upon their answers or pose new questions to steer the conversation towards a new line of inquiry. The interview structure, then, could be considered loosely semi-structured; in that I had a set of questions and themes I knew I wanted to cover, but the conversation was permitted to flow as the participants wished and I was able to pursue interesting, novel and salient points as they arose in the discussion. As discussions progressed, if they appeared to be getting off-topic then I had a set of themes and topics to which I could refer to steer the conversation back towards a more relevant subject. Answers would regularly be heterogeneous in their format, sometimes they would be short and snappy jokes, sometimes they would be in the form of long-form rhetoric, often they would include images, video or audio to back up or emphasise a point. Part of the challenge of analysis was finding a way to incorporate this vast array of media into a coherent analysis.

With all the group interviews, eventually the discussion would begin to peter out. Participants would either begin to get inexorably off topic in their subjects of conversation, or else the majority would lose interest in the discussion, move on to other threads or websites or else presumably log off entirely. Usually at this point I would post a final summary of the points we covered, sincerely thank people for taking part, regardless of how much or how little they contributed and then state that I would leave the thread open for discussion, but I would not be asking any further research questions now. That way the thread would remain on the forum, any users who pass through the site may encounter it and if they want to they could contact me directly. This would not be my last interaction with the community and

observations would continue, but by closing off my line of inquiry in that thread I was able to, in effect, “walk away” from the interaction, which is a feature of in-person interviews, but can be difficult in online interviews. If I simply allowed the conversation on the thread to slow and eventually stop without ever acknowledging that I was not going to ask any more questions at that time, then participants would be left in the dark about whether I was expecting them to continue contributing to the discussion.

Parallel to the group threads, some individuals would contact me through the in-site private messaging service. The interactions between me and individual participants one-on-one followed a much more recognisable question-response format: I’d begin with simple questions about how they got involved with the movement, why they feel it is important to be involved (or, indeed, if they think it is important at all) and then allow questions to arise from their answers.

These one-on-one interviews were not, however, without their own set of challenges. One participant, when approaching me for a one-on-one interview, simply copied and pasted passages from an interview that they had given to other academics or print/broadcast media who had approached them in the past. This created an unexpected challenge when it came to analysis because the question of ownership of that data came into question. These answers were originally provided to another researcher/journalist for their purposes and now the same participant is reusing them presumably copied verbatim from wherever it was they spoke to the original researcher. The question for me and my supervisor became: who now has the right to use this new copy of the text in their work? Our logic was that the participant is the one who owns their answers; the original recipient of that answer would not have a right to tell the participant where they could repeat it, and the participant would be under no obligation to credit the original recipient when repeating the passage to a new one. As a researcher, to avoid potential claims of plagiarism, it was decided that wherever passages

such as these are directly quoted in the thesis text it will be referenced with an explanatory footnote. This was a difficulty unique to online text-based interactions, if a participant had said to me in a real-life face-to-face interview *“here is what I told an academic last week”* then questions of plagiarism would not have been considered if I published what they repeated to me, however considering it is a pure text excerpt from a passage they directly copied from another interaction I felt it necessary to acknowledge the potential issues with this encounter.

3.4.2 Offline

As well as immersing myself in online communities associated with Anonymous, I also attended three separate instances of the “Million Mask March” – a large annual protest held on November 5th in London. Superficially, gathering data at these events simply required attending the event, making notes, taking pictures and speaking to participants and members of the public. There were, however, numerous practical considerations which became clear once the event started: the sheer number of people attending the event could cause problems in terms of safely moving throughout the crowd, sometimes elements of the crowd would clash with police, and often the police would respond by cordoning off sections of the crowd and attempting to control their movements – again, this made data collection relatively difficult. The nature of these crowd dynamics and the crowd’s conflict with law enforcement changed over the three separate November 5th protests I attended (from 2013 to 2015), and the challenges they posed to data collection aside, they were important features of developing my understanding of the nature of Anonymous in relation to “meatspace” protests (i.e., protests in the offline world).

By the third protest, November 5th, 2015, I had become very used to moving through the crowds quickly whilst staying in touch with the important sites of activity (the front of the

crowd if it were moving, locations as the crowd moved past them – Downing Street for example, or, more recently, the Egyptian Embassy in 2015). I had also learnt to be aware of the movement of the police, when they were likely to move in and block the passage of a particularly rowdy section of the crowd, and how I needed to act such that I might be let through established police lines (e.g. typically, police would form a line to block the movement of groups of protestors, but individuals hoping to pass would often be let through). These issues will be dealt with more extensively in the chapter related to the Million Mask March later in the thesis. In terms of the method, however, it should be noted that collecting data at such an event was not such a simple task as showing up with a pen and notepad, observing the crowd and then later packing up and going home – rather collection data at such an event was a skill in and of itself, and one which I was required to learn and adapt over the course of my four years conducting the ethnography, and the three consecutive years in which I attended the event.

3.5 Analysis

The data collection phase of an ethnographic study can, at its peak, become somewhat overwhelming. Immersed as you are in a culture, paying attention to every detail, it can be somewhat challenging to see the sharper edge of the research process - the line that your project cuts through the data being collected. Once the data collection phase of the study was ending I found that the most productive method of understanding and organising the data was to begin to write about it – such that it might begin to coalesce into some kind of identifiable argument. The writing up process, for an ethnographic study, is not just a one-for-one process of transcribing the information collected onto paper (or, in this case, a word processor document) rather, the writing itself becomes a method of analysis, in that it requires the writer to organise, sort, categorise and identify patterns in the data which up until that point existed

as a collection of shorthand notes, passages of text, audio, images and video.

The outcome of this three-year project was a detailed and dense depiction of the Anonymous communities studied, informed by numerous interviews, hundreds of hours of observation of activist activity both online and offline and innumerable textual, video and audio artefacts relating to the communities studied. The data is dense, heterogeneous in format and presentation. Not only did I have to incorporate online and offline interactions, but also find a way to include video, text, audio and static image data, as well as my extensive field notes and interview transcripts.

Considering the heavily qualitative nature of the data produced and the ethnographic data collection method employed, a thematic analysis seemed appropriate, but I faced the task of deciding how best to organise the presentation of the results. We settled on a structure which would organise the presentation of the data into a “Case Study” format. Each case presented would be a phenomenon in the Anonymous movement, an event, an operation (i.e. a campaign of activism), a community of note or some artefact of importance. This would allow me to acknowledge the history of each case alongside my data, which is a reflection on its current existence – I believe both facets of each case are important because due to the fractious and ever-changing nature of the Anonymous movement the presentation of each case is often subject to rapid change and so to fully understand each case we must understand both its current existence and how it came to be. Additionally, organising my very heterogeneous data into case studies allows me to focus on salient elements of the data collected, rather than attempting to present everything as disorganised raw data or else forced into loose patterns or themes, or splitting the data along other cleavages such as presenting data on each community observed in turn.

The case studies chosen are as follows:

- The Million Mask March – this is Anonymous’ largest real-life protest. It is of importance because for more “meatspace” focused protest groups, rallies and protests on the street are of importance. For Anonymous their online presence often takes precedence but the Million Mask March is where Anonymous’ online presence coalesces into concrete form in the real world. This chapter allows me to place Anonymous in contrast to other protest movements where real-life protests may be more of a focus – this will hopefully serve to emphasise the novel nature of the Anonymous movement. Additionally, the observations on the Million Mask March are spread across three events each a year apart, presenting this data allows me to present how this event has changed at each fixed point, and what that might mean for Anonymous.
- The IRC AnonOps – for Gabriella Coleman, the internet relay chat room #AnonOps was the hub of all Anonymous activity, housing bustling crowds of many thousands at its peak. Now it appears to have dwindled in importance, but it remains a site for a great many interactions. I would like to examine the importance of this site for Anonymous considering its importance in the development of the movement. This will be supported by observations from the forum “WhyWeProtest” – which is a site specifically related to the campaign against Scientology around which AnonOps originally began to flourish.
- The Mask – for a community where iconography and imagery is very important, the mask is the most prominent icon used to represent Anonymous. How the mask became an Anonymous symbol, I think, reflects their beginnings as tricksters and pranksters, and how the mask has changed in its usage is indicative of the journey Anonymous has taken since 2008. Unlike the previous cases, the case of the mask will

incorporate data from across the entirety of the data collection period in an attempt to garner a view on the importance of the mask across the scope of the movement.

The intention is that across the breadth of these four cases I might adequately represent the current state of the Anonymous movement, and provide positive evidence to the argument that attempting to encapsulate the movement into the schema of a single **identity** would be to ignore the great variance in presentation that I have observed. Rather, it is more appropriate to consider Anonymous a *social movement*, one which encapsulates a great many often conflicting identities, not just unbound by geographical location but irrelevant of it, one ever changing and fracturing into new operations and splinter groups but all ultimately moving under the banner of Anonymous.

3.6 Ethics

There were many ethical considerations which had to be considered both before the study commencement, and during data collection and analysis. Ethics was not simply an administrative barrier to cross before the study could begin in earnest; rather it was a constant consideration when all study procedures were taking place, regardless of whether participants were involved at the time. With that said, most of the challenges in setting up and carrying out this project were related to how the participant population might appropriately be approached, observed, interviewed and the data from these participants handled and analysed. Anonymous represent a relatively unknown quantity from the outside, they can appear volatile, aggressive and antagonistic – and regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, this viewpoint had to be considered when approaching the ethics of this project.

Hacktivist groups have been involved in several high-profile attacks on digital assets of both private and governmental institutions worldwide. Consequently, there was a significant chance

that some participants in this study will have either engaged in, or will have intended to engage in criminal activity in the future.

As a researcher, this could potentially lead to an ethical dilemma if a participant reveals details of either past or intended criminal activity during an interview or group interaction. The ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) guidelines provide relatively clear guidance as to how a researcher should act in this situation: the safety of the researcher and other people is absolutely paramount, above the integrity of the data produced as part of the study, so if the researcher feels that not divulging this information might lead to significant harm (to either the researcher, the participant or other members of the public), then the researcher should take steps to act upon the information they have received – following the appropriate pre-agreed process to do so.

*“Researchers should, when eliciting consent, make clear the limits to confidentiality, particularly when working with potentially vulnerable individuals or groups - for example when undertaking research with children, families and vulnerable populations, or **individuals involved in illegal activities**. If for example an interview reveals that a participant or another person identified in the interview is in significant danger, the researcher will be obliged to take action in response to that disclosure.”*

(ESRC Framework for Research Ethics 2015, 2015:24)

Otherwise, if the potentiality of harm was judged not to be an issue in this case, then the anonymity and the dignity of the participant should take precedence, and this information would be kept in the strictest confidence – in-line with the agreed anonymous and confidential data handling process for any other data gathered throughout the study. Limitations arise in that the ESRC guidelines are relatively vague as to the description of “harm” – the decision was

reached that such a definition would have to be decided on a case-by-case basis, following discussion between myself and my supervisory team.

The limits of confidentiality with regards to criminal behaviour as described above were explained to all participants as part of the informed consent process (ESRC Framework for research ethics, 2010 – updated September 2012). Criminality was by no means a prerequisite for participation in the study, instead the inclusion criteria required that the participant self-identified as part of a hacktivist group – which is not a criminal act. This approach was chosen for several reasons:

1. Anonymous is a group which emphasises an ethos of participation – you become a member simply by seeking to take part, however little commitment that participation might entail.
2. As an outside onlooker, I could never be in a position of authority such that I could decide as to the authenticity of the participant's claims of participation.
3. The only source of authenticity, then, comes from the participant.

This approach has limitations in that it is the participants' prerogative to be truthful about their participation in Anonymous activity. The verisimilitude of participant claims are a limitation of all studies which require a participant to self-identify or self-report a feature of their life, but seeing as how this particular project was concerned with how a community which encourages participation goes about constructing an identity it was concluded that allowing the participants to "opt-in" to the community through self-identification would be the most practical approach, as well as in line with the participatory nature of Anonymous as a whole.

Participants who were interviewed as part of the study were shown the interview transcript at the end of the session to ensure that they were aware of the contents, and felt that they had been appropriately represented in the data. For the most part, those participants who were interacted

with through text communication would be left with a record of the dialogue by looking back through the history of the communication – in these cases participants were simply asked to confirm they were happy with their representation.

Anonymity is tantamount to a central tenet of the Anonymous community. This posed a practical problem, as contacting and interacting with participants required specific preparation. The ethnographic observation period of the study allowed me to determine appropriate ways by which contact might be made with participants – the level of information they are and are not willing to divulge and the appropriate space for interaction. Additionally, participants identified during the ethnographic observation often acted as gatekeepers to further contacts both within and outside of the original community.

The focus on anonymity made the issue of consent rather problematic, before the study started it was understood that participants were unlikely to agree to sign a consent form. As per ESRC guidelines (2012), wherever possible, written consent was sought (such as face to face meetings). If, however, written consent was unobtainable, the participants were made aware of all the limitations with regards to information security as described above, and were informed that their continued participation in the study was predicated on the assumption that they had read and fully understood the information provided to them regarding the study, and that answering any further questions indicated an informed *assent* to participate in the study.

In addition to protecting the anonymity of the participants, protecting myself and affiliated organisations (Nottingham University, Horizon Doctoral Training Centre etc) was also a challenge when interacting directly with participants. A certain section of the participants who were likely to be contacted as part of this study are no doubt tech-savvy and relatively suspicious of outside attention. Additionally, as described earlier, there was a higher than normal possibility that participants were engaging in illegal activity online – and in the Anonymous community often that means exposing and sharing other persons' personal data.

To protect myself from any unwanted digital intrusions, certain practical measures were put in place to ensure that the digital assets of both me and the University/Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) were protected. These included using a web-browser which masked my IP address, and conducting interviews through VPN software.

Before any interaction took place between researcher and research population, two distinct methods of interaction were considered. Both will be covered below, with the limitations and logic of each method discussed, as well as the justification for the method ultimately selected. The first method was one which sought to obscure my identity from the study population. It would achieve this by maintaining an overt level of obfuscation of identity – i.e., the participants would be aware that I was hiding my identity, and the justifications for this would be made clear to them.

- To protect the digital assets of both myself and the University/Horizon DTC, neither logo would be present on the information sheets provided to the participants.
- Similarly, neither the University, Horizon DTC nor my name would be mentioned in the text on this study material.
- When interacting directly with participants (through online chat) digital measures would be put in place to mask my location.
- The participants would *not* be given false information regarding my identity, location or affiliation with any other group. Participants would be made aware that my identity is being masked to protect both parties.
- The research aim, details of their data protection rights and any other rights which apply to the data produced as part of the study would be fully explained to participants before any data is gathered.

Several methods for garnering rapport or trust between the anonymous participant and anonymous researcher were suggested, including keeping an online research journal which would demonstrate to the participants the nature of the study, and the type of work I engage in. I could then point potential participants to this page when I wanted to demonstrate to them my credentials without revealing my identity.

This approach, whilst potentially less risky for the parties involved, throws up further ethical issues in terms of informed consent and practical difficulties in terms of developing a trust between the study population and me.

The second method involves fully informing the participants as to my identity, affiliated organisations and the research details. Whilst this might expose the above parties to potential risk, it would, nonetheless, constitute a more full and informed participation in the study for the participants.

This approach has worked in the past: in an interview with the Huffington Post, Gabriella Coleman (US anthropologist who has studied hacktivists since 2001) stated that when she began studying Anonymous, she “lurked” the IRC channels, and when she was asked who she was she simply stated:

Coleman: *I'm Gabrielle Coleman and I look at this sort of stuff:*

Interviewer: *Wait, so you told them that you were an academic and they welcomed you anyway?*

Coleman: *Yeah. The pressure not to become public means, who speaks for Anonymous? ...The thing about me is that I'm structurally outside and yet I know what's going on, and so I became a handy broker.”*

(Coleman, in the Huffington Post 2013:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/27/gabriella-coleman-anonymous_n_2663775.html)

Whilst I had no intention to start “speaking for Anonymous”, as mentioned by Coleman in the excerpt above, the example demonstrates that a not wholly secretive approach can work and has worked in the past.

Whilst this is perhaps a riskier approach, it might be more ethically viable with regards to issues of informed consent, information governance and participant-researcher trust.

Deciding between these two methods proved to be the most difficult pre-study ethical decision which had to be made. Each method has advantages and limitations but ultimately, the second method: the “open and honest” approach was chosen to be most appropriate. The reasoning is as follows:

Part of the PhD process involves presenting your work both internally and externally to stakeholders, the public and other academics. PhD students are encouraged to network, develop relationships with academic and public organisations and communicate their work as widely as possible – this is a big part of a university’s move towards focusing on the “impact” of research. So, as I communicate my work to a greater and greater number of people, the network of individuals aware of a UK-based researcher conducting ethnographic research on the hacktivist group Anonymous grows ever wider and wider. Simultaneously, I am speaking to countless online participants, and (if in this hypothetical scenario I have chosen the “anonymous” approach) attempting to maintain a veil of anonymity between myself and the research population in question. This network, too, grows wider and wider as the list of contacts grows. As time passes the chance that these two populations (one anonymised and one not) overlap becomes increasingly likely. This might not necessarily have been a problem, but it is not inconceivable to imagine a situation whereby a participant agrees to be interviewed and then further down the line encounters my work at an academic conference or some presentation and discovers some element of my identity which makes them reconsider their agreement to

participate in the study in the first place. For example, perhaps a participant does not like the university, the funding body, or even simply the department with which I am affiliated. *This problem would be caused by my being unable to fully inform the participant prior to participation in the study.*

The second reasoning for choosing the “open and honest” approach is more of a practical concern. Maintaining a fully anonymised persona for a full 4-year study may have proven to be incredibly problematic. Interacting with the same research participants every day (such a level of interaction is a big part of ethnographic research) can unintentionally lead to the leaking of personal details which might, over time, amount to me being un-anonymised. Additionally, considering the hacker culture with which most of the participants are associated, the research population has a very high likelihood of containing individuals for whom the challenge of revealing concealed information is part of the fun of engaging with their community and so they may see my intentions to maintain my anonymous persona as a challenge to break down the barriers I have put up between them and myself.

For these reasons, the “*open and honest*” approach was chosen, it allowed me to be sure that the participants were as fully informed as possible before any study process took place, I could be assured that participants would not feel deceived and it did not place extra pressure on me to maintain a veil of anonymity between myself and the research population. It allowed me to be as transparent as possible with my participants; they were fully informed as to what would happen to their data, who would look at it, how it would be anonymised and where it might be published. They were assured of my research credentials, and the authenticity of the position from which I approached them – as a researcher working out of a respected university backed up by a solid supervisory team and fully supported by ethical approval.

The intention was to give as much information to the participants as possible and appropriate, and allow them to make their own decision about whether they might like to continue to interact

with me. In this way, any accusations of deception or misdirection could be avoided and participants could feel comfortable about how they were being approached, and the level of information they were divulging.

The above ethical considerations were only the challenges faced when approaching the beginning of the study – determining an appropriate means to approach participants and collect data. Once the data collection began there were other considerations which had to be considered.

The ethnographic method chosen necessarily requires a certain degree of immersion in the target population. I was aware that when Gabriella Coleman (2008, 2010, and 2012) carried out her extensive study of Anonymous she too immersed herself in the various communities, but she stated that she ostensibly became a liaison between Anonymous and some media representatives. She became a broker of information, passing it between her participants in the Anonymous community and outside onlookers who would go through her to contact Anonymous sources. This closeness to her population put her in a privileged position when it came to carrying-out observation, interviews and data collection in general - her position was, to my knowledge, unique in this respect and having spoken to a great many Anons who are familiar with Coleman's work I can attest that she is still incredibly well thought of within the various Anonymous-related communities. This approach, however, is not without criticism: with her approach requiring a great degree of integration into the community, the accusation of bias in her conclusions cannot be ignored – she sacrificed a certain level of objectivity such that she might gain a deeper understanding of the subjective nature of this new social phenomenon. I too wanted to approach the community with a method which would allow me to get very close to the people “on the ground” of Anonymous, but I was conscious of the limitations of this approach and, as briefly touched on earlier, I had no intentions of “*speaking for Anonymous*”.

This consideration was one of the reasons the anonymised approach was initially considered, aside from the risk of attention from potentially malicious hackers, we were also conscious that to become embroiled in potentially illegal actions would be deeply inappropriate for my position as an academic student. In choosing the more “open and honest” approach, we necessarily accepted that this would bring me closer to participants and, whilst this approach was advantageous in providing a deeper understanding of the subject, it would require me to be more mindful of the balancing act that a researcher must engage in when immersing oneself in a community which itself often straddled the line between legal and illegal behaviour. I believe we succeeded in developing a data collection strategy which at once allowed me to get close to my subjects, and maintained an appropriate degree of distance between the research subject and myself as a researcher. We achieved this, in part, through an acknowledgement and constant assessment of this challenge from the very outset (including notifying the university registrar of the nature of this research project before we even commenced), and ensuring that participants were aware that I was a researcher first and foremost, and whilst I had absolutely no intention of becoming a potential opponent or target for the community, neither did I want to become what might be thought of as a member.

There were other practical considerations with regards to ethics: confidentiality of data, anonymity of participants, and appropriate storage of collected data.

3.7 Anonymity and Confidentiality

All the data collected in group conversations took place in public spheres. Forums which archive old threads may still have copies of the conversations which took place there, whereas more fast-paced chat rooms such as the IRC rooms where a great deal of my observations took place will not necessarily store chat logs.

For conversations where copies may still exist on the internet, I faced a challenge with regards

to how or indeed whether I could effectively anonymise the data. When presenting certain interactions within this thesis I could, potentially, alter the usernames of the participants involved or else assign them participant numbers or other aliases. I concluded that in the interests of practicality, and wherever possible, I would assign all participants an alias in this thesis text; regardless of whether the interaction took place in a public forum or not. This would mean that where conversations took place in private, or else on a site where the public interactions are not recorded (i.e., on faster moving chat rooms like IRC) the confidentiality would be maintained. This would not, however, prevent the fact that anyone could choose passages from conversations which took place on publicly accessible forums which maintain an archive of old text, and copy them into any standard internet search engine and without too much trouble arrive at the original thread. Whilst this is obviously not ideal, when participants engaged in these interactions they were fully aware they were doing so on a public forum where a record would be kept of the dialogue, so a certain amount of confidentiality was not possible in that respect.

4.0 The Million Mask March

Anonymous is a primarily online entity. Its origins are in campaigns for online-facing issues such as copyright, freedom of information and censorship. There is, however, a long history all the way back to 2008 and Chanology, of Anonymous and real-life protests.

The Million Mask March has been the largest Anonymous-related real-life protest since its first inception in 2011. Where the Chanology protests in 2008 mustered an estimated five to eight thousand activists to Scientology locations across the globe, it is estimated that in London alone on November 5th, 2013 there were nearing two thousand Anonymous activists on Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Parliament Square for the second iteration of the Million Mask March. The London protests are reportedly the largest globally, but they occur in parallel with over 450 other cities such as Paris, Manchester, New York, Amsterdam and Milan.

The date of the march is significant as it occurs on the traditional British event of Bonfire Night - the famous date of the “gunpowder plot”: whereby a group of English Catholics, led by Robert Catesby, attempted to blow up the House of Lords during the opening of Parliament on November 5th, 1605. In England, it is traditional on this date to construct a crude “Guy” from old clothing, straw and stuffing and then place him on a bonfire. The stuffed “Guy” is meant to represent the most infamous member of Catesby’s co-conspirators: Guy Fawkes. This somewhat grisly tradition is mirrored in Alan Moore’s graphic novel “V for Vendetta” where the titular character “V” succeeds where the 1605 conspirators failed and blows up the Houses of Parliament, albeit this time in a fictional dystopic future Britain. It is from the graphic novel, and subsequent Hollywood film, that the symbol of Anonymous: the white V mask, is drawn – the specifics of the mask symbol will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

The Million Mask March (often referred to as the MMM) was an opportunity for me to observe Anonymous in the real world. Until the date of the first protest all my interactions with the community had been online and whilst the online presence of Anonymous is important, the march presented an opportunity to see how such an online focused and strictly anonymised community presented itself in the real world – i.e., when they come face-to-face. This chapter will draw from three separate events of observation taking place on November 5th, 2013, 2014 and 2015 – in each instance the event was due to begin at roughly 6pm at Trafalgar Square in London and at this time the crowd would march from the square, down Whitehall towards Parliament, passing Downing Street and finishing at Parliament Square. I observed that there were significant differences in how the event played out each year – and I will argue that these differences are salient in that they reflect upon the nature of the movement, and how it has changed in that time.

I will use the data in this chapter to argue the following points:

- 1) The Million Mask March is an event which brings together many different protest causes, and so it begins to bring into question the concept that Anonymous has a single collective identity from which they draw.
- 2) Despite this significant variance in protest causes, there are elements of the march which emphasise that attendant activists can all be considered part of the movement, suggesting that defining Anonymous with regards to their single focus on Freedom of Information would be incorrect.

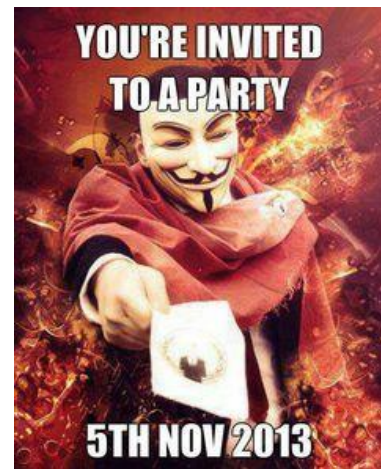


Figure 2 image inviting viewers to the Million Mask March Nov 2013. Original artist unknown, credit to Toni Nicolle (anonymoustartofrevolution.com)

- 3) Additionally, the nature of the Million Mask March has changed significantly over the short three-year timescale in which I had to observe it, which reflects the changing nature of the Anonymous movement in that time.
- 4) How each of the above observations support my conception that Anonymous can be considered a New Social Movement.

November 2013 was my first experience of the Million Mask March. I had followed the build-up in forums and on social media feeds eagerly. Anonymous-related twitter accounts and Facebook pages would direct users to MMM related websites (such as <http://www.millionmaskmarch.com/>) or else share digital posters and flyers detailing the local and global nature of the protest. The event was an unmistakably global one, even though 2013 was only the second year of this event occurring, anons (the abbreviation used within Anonymous to refer to other members of the movement) in numerous forums were confident that the turn out would be impressive. One anon stated:

“Please let me bore you for a bit and explain, please have patience...

first of all, lets accept that the March is going ahead, globally! because it is in over 300 cities!

Yes it is repeating the same pattern of Occupy, whereby the media will use the fact that not a single defined point or clear message is presented, and that is reason to attack and ridicule the movement etc

This fact coupled with the mask, is good circus material for mainstream media!”

(User: T at WhyWeProtest.net, October 2013)

Here, T makes explicit some salient points I will expand later in this chapter: the multitude of causes being touted at the protest.

Previous years appeared to have garnered a decent turn out – but as I would come to realise, 2013 would be the biggest attendance yet.

The event in London was to run in conjunction with a reported four hundred-plus parallel events worldwide, spread throughout the date of November 5th (depending upon time zone). On the forums, IRC (internet relay chat) and social media most anons expected the largest turn out of all the locations to be the one in London – this is presumably due to the significance of the date in the British calendar as well as the association that Anonymous has with the movie V for Vendetta and the significance that specifically London on November 5th has for the plot of the movie, the graphic novel and the gunpowder plot in British history.

It is worth highlighting, at this point, the parallels between the Million Mask March and the events of the above-mentioned film and graphic novel as whilst, for the UK, November 5th has significance because of the historical events of the Gunpowder Plot which occurred on this date, it is likely that this date was chosen for a global protest because the date is significant for the plot of the film (which is inspired by the Gunpowder Plot). In V for Vendetta, on November 5th – as the protagonist V is preparing his explosives to blow up the houses of Parliament, he simultaneously sends thousands of white masks to British homes, and invites the occupants to take to the streets on the night of the 5th. Then, following a catalyst event (in the film it is the death of a little girl at the hands of a member of the secret police), tens of thousands of civilians line the streets of Trafalgar Square to march on Parliament.

The parallels between the final scenes of the film and the actual events on the streets of London on that night are difficult to ignore, I believe the film was important for a lot of the aspects of the development of this event – perhaps most saliently the location and date.

I will use this first section to give a brief description of the events of the protests and the recurring features which I have observed every year I have attended. This first section is

significantly descriptive in content, and the themes and meanings of the salient features will be expanded on and explored towards the latter end of this chapter.

Just as in the film, the march begins at Trafalgar Square, passes down Whitehall and towards the houses of Parliament. On the silver screen, the crowd is halted by a line of armed police at the edge of Trafalgar square and just as in the film, at the MMM each year there is heavy police presence – though the police in the film are far more heavily armed and aggressive. In the real world, the actions of the police changed significantly over the three years that I attended the protest, beginning with minimal presence and only minor attempts at crowd control in 2013, by 2015 the attendant police force was much more pronounced, with officers in full riot-gear carrying out regular manoeuvres to separate, contain and control the movement of protesters.

Just as in the film, the protestors are masked and often cloaked – though in the film their costumes are universally comprised of the white mask, black conical hat and black cloak whereas the protestors at the Million Mask March are far more varied in their presentation. In the next chapter will cover the importance of the mask for Anonymous, and the route it took to becoming the icon of the movement, but suffice it here to say that the scene of thousands of anonymised Londoners marching on Parliament is undoubtedly an inspiration for the concept of the Million Mask March. In the film, the crowd is halted by a line of police before exiting Trafalgar square, whilst I did not observe such an event in any of my years at the protests what I did see are significant efforts by police to control the flow and movement of crowds through the streets of London, and in particular, 2015 where I believe the clashes between police and protesters were more heated than previous years. Police lines would form in front and behind the crowds to contain their movements, as the crowd moved down Whitehall and onto Parliament Street so too would the police line follow them, and once they reached Parliament

Square the line would form up on the end of Parliament Street effectively containing the swirling mass of protesters on the Parliament Square green and the road by which it is encircled. People travelling as anything other than ones or twos would be stopped at the line and prevented from passing through (as a researcher this allowed me to move in and out of the crowd proper whenever I liked, as I was invariably alone and unmasked). So, in effect, whilst I might not have observed a solid wall of armed officers akin to the film, what I did see were masked protesters on the streets of London being cordoned off, sometimes rushed and encircled by police often wielding shields, thick helmets with visors and batons – in addition I also observed mounted police and an abundance of heavily armoured police vans which also lined the streets; often five or six in a row, each with blue lights flashing.

My drawing parallels between V for Vendetta and the Million Mask March are not to make any deeper point than to say that the implied message of the film parallels the implied message of the march: that is that whilst there are a great many varied people on the streets of London on those cold November nights, the March is, at its core, a demonstration of power and strength in numbers. Just as V sought to unite the people of Britain against the seemingly unassailable fascist British government in V for Vendetta, the Million Mask March is a means by which Anonymous might show the world that they are a potent movement which can inspire a great many people to action. Whilst I might have observed many varied messages pertaining to a vast array of issues on display over the years I attended this protest – without fail they all claimed to be a part of Anonymous.

4.1 Variance in protest form and content

Anonymous formed out of a constellation of challenges which come packaged with new internet media, communication technology and social forms – for Anonymous, chief amongst

these concerns is freedom of information. The early protests regarding Scientology around 2008 grew, in part, from the church's suppression of embarrassing videos of Tom Cruise; an action that Anonymous saw as a suppression of free speech and, ultimately, a strangling of the free movement of information.

In the same vein, in 2011 Anonymous launched an Operation targeting Sony and their PlayStation Network. The group claimed:

"Your corrupt business practices are indicative of a corporate philosophy that would deny consumers the right to use products they have paid for and rightfully own, in the manner of their choosing,"

And:

"Perhaps you should alert your customers to the fact that they are apparently only renting your products? In light of this assault on both rights and free expression, Anonymous, the notoriously handsome rulers of the internet, would like to inform you that you have only been 'renting' your web domains. Having trodden upon Anonymous' rights, you must now be trodden on."

(Gizmodo, 2011 <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2011/04/anonymous-attacks-sony-to-protest-ps3-hacker-lawsuit/>)

Anonymous members launched a series of denial of service attacks against the company which led to widespread disruption.

The Sony and PlayStation Network hacks of 2011 were in response to efforts by Sony to sue George Hotz – the then 21-year-old security researcher who, according to Sony's legal team, received donations following the publication of information regarding the jailbreaking of the PlayStation 3 – an action which Anonymous took exception to because: *“You have victimised your customers for merely possessing information, and continue to target every person who seeks this information. In so doing you have violated the privacy of thousands”* (Anonymous, Statement relating to the Sony Hacks, 2011). Though it is important to note that later the implicated Anonymous community “AnonOps” distanced itself from the Sony hacks stating that *“for once we did not do it”* - though they conceded it could have been other Anons working separately – an example of the flexible and participatory nature of Anonymous Operations. The Sony hacks were, as stated above, in response to the actions of Sony which were perceived as relating to the curtailment of the freedom of movement of information.

There are countless other hacks attributed to Anonymous which follow a similar pattern: hacks in defence of the right to the free movement of information (for example, Operation Payback, which targeted Amazon, PayPal and Mastercard amongst others – which occurred in response to the withdrawal of support for the whistleblowing site Wikileaks (Adderley and Halliday, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/dec/08/operation-payback-mastercard-website-wikileaks>)). Anonymous bridge a gap between the two ends of the spectrum suggested by Taylor and Jordan (2004) – that is the direct-action hacktivists and the politically correct hacktivists. Their online actions suggest that they believe whole-heartedly in the free movement of information, as detailed above, but just like direct action hacktivists they are not averse to using methods which might disrupt their opponents' information flow. Anonymous' protest pro-forma then, might suggest that issues of freedom of information are their primary concern. I would, however, argue that the actions of Anonymous members at the Million Mask March would go some way to demonstrate that this view of the movement is far too narrow –

whilst Anonymous might have formed out of these internet-related challenges, what they have become and what the Million Mask March has become, is a mast upon which a multitude of different protest groups feel they can hang their banner. The following section will present my data on this subject, and discuss if the notion of collective identity is an appropriate concept to apply to Anonymous as a result.

The Million Mask March has changed significantly over the three years that I attended it – but one element that has not changed from the first moment I walked onto Trafalgar Square on November the 5th 2013 to the same date in 2015 is the vast array of protest causes which are present on those cold November evenings. In contrast to the focus on internet-related issues, the causes on display at the Million Mask March include opposition to NHS cuts, austerity, protesters highlighting media misrepresentation of the movement, political corruption, badger culling and fracking – and without a doubt innumerable other issues I did not have the opportunity to encounter amongst the bustling crowds. Each of these clusters of single issue protesters looked akin to the other masked individuals at the protest, and each set up their banner and belted out their campaign slogans like stalls in a market square.



Figure 3 Anonymous activists protest Fracking at the Million Mask March 05/11/13 - picture taken by myself



Figure 4 Anonymous activists supporting Julian Assange Million Mask March 05/11/13 picture taken by myself

Many other definitions of Anonymous up until this point had focused upon their campaign for freedom of information online – to then find that the current largest Anonymous protest in the world contains very little mention of exclusively internet related causes compared to the multitude of other causes on show was a somewhat jarring experience. How could this protest claim to be affiliated with Anonymous if the issues raised have very little to do with the internet? If I were examining an anti-globalisation protest group and I attended one of their protests and, over its course, the protest did not contain any reference to globalisation I would question if I had come to the right place. This experience in November 2013 was one of the first instances where I began to question definitions of Anonymous which attempted to understand them as a single unit with a singular will, purpose and composition. Perhaps this is not an Anonymous protest after all – if the issues being raised are not internet related? My questions on this were answered by a couple I spoke to on the street – carrying their masks dangling from their backpacks. I asked:

“How do you know these people are part of Anonymous?” and I gestured towards to bustling crowd of masked protesters.

“Well, they’re here, aren’t they?” the man replied. *“You’re here too, that means you’re part of*

it as well”.

“Don't tell my ethics board that” was my response at the time.

Reflecting upon it later I would realise that this is the reason why a protest such as the Million Mask March can be related to so many different non-internet related issues and still be an Anonymous protest. All that is required to be part of the Anonymous movement is the willingness to participate, because there is no central authority that means that there is no-one to truly arbitrate what is and what is not an issue for Anonymous to tackle. So, when the many badger culling, fracking or NHS austerity protesters show up at the Million Mask March they have as much right to claim to be part of Anonymous as anyone else. When I came to this realisation in 2013 I had to begin to redefine my definition of Anonymous, I could not continue to consider them a group solely concerned with internet-related issues, rather I had to broaden my definition, consider definitions which might allow for the incorporation of a multitude of perhaps even conflicting protest campaigns.

There is, however, certainly an identifiable role to be played by any protester who wishes to claim to be part of this Anonymous-related march and often there is a common outfit through which they can be identified: as described above, face-covering is essential; a mask, scarf or even just a hoodie tied tightly around the face this is the beginning of the uniform through which you might identify with the march. Next, movement in groups – very rarely did any of the attendees of the MMM seem to be travelling alone, indeed most moved in large groups of four or five persons at once. Many carried placards, others passed out pamphlets. These are clearly identifiable material indicators of membership in the march, but there are behavioural indicators also: singing protest songs and chants, hostile or dismissive behaviour towards people in a position of legislative authority such as the police, similarly a person might show disregard for the space around them: for example I regularly observed people climbing on the

Landseer Lions statues in Trafalgar Square, I also observed protesters climbing on the statue of Lloyd George and even one protester urinating on the bronze statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square in 2014 (before being hauled away by three policemen).

Once the crowd begins to move it becomes difficult to distinguish which protesters are against badger culling and which are against fracking – they all hoist their banners above their heads and continue to sing their own protest songs, but they are quickly swallowed by the massive rolling crowd that is the Million Mask March. Chants regarding the NHS cuts are drowned out by “*Whose streets? OUR STREETS!*” - a universal chant which seems to cut across the issues presented at the protest. If the beginning of the protest at Trafalgar resembles a collection of market stalls, then the trip from the square down Whitehall begins to look more like a traditional protest march – the crowd is imbued with purpose: reach Parliament. Quickly, Trafalgar Square empties leaving only a few police to clear up some of the mess and answer any questions passing tourists or Londoners might have.

Once they reach Parliament Square the intentionally disorganised nature of Anonymous truly begins to emerge. Though the specific nature of the police cordon changed throughout the years I attended, one thing remained the same – once the crowd reached Parliament the line of police which followed them down Whitehall would close the exits off the Square and pen the protesters on the green and surrounding roads. The mass of masked activists, at this point, would congregate either outside parliament on the eastern side of the square, or else mill around on the green – now without a specific destination, it was at this point that conflicts between protesters and police would often flare. Most protesters would gather, and continue to chant and sing as they had during their journey down Whitehall from Trafalgar, this good-natured chaos would be punctuated by small acts of defiance which would often provoke responses from the police: setting off fireworks on the green, urinating on the statues and, eventually, intentional antagonising of the police cordon.



Figure 5 Anonymous Activists light flares and set off fireworks November 5th, 2015 - picture credit to myself

In 2015 – the final time I would attend the protest before drawing a close to my data collection, I arrived later than anticipated to Trafalgar Square and found that the crowd had moved on. Unlike previous years where I was at the front of the crowd, taking pictures and making notes, speaking to protesters, this time I had to hurry to catch up with the tail-end of the moving hoard of Anons. I caught up with the line of police officers first, over the years I had found that the police form a loose cordon around the bulk of the protest and in every other year I was within this broad bubble of activists, in 2015 I was lagging so I was required to break through somehow. I observed several interesting interactions at this barrier between protest and non-protest, and it was these interactions which began to crystallise a pattern which I had observed at the two previous years' protests: as an individual, unmasked and only carrying a backpack and notepad/pen I was let through the police line without incident, but I observed many groups of late-coming masked protesters being stopped where I was allowed to pass. Clearly there was a judgement being made between those who are protesters (masked, in groups, perhaps carrying placards) and those who were not (like myself, often unmasked, without any outwardly obvious protest material). Despite what the couple I referred to earlier might suggest, there was a

protester profile which I did not fit, but others certainly did. The police were not making this decision based upon the content of the placards, banners or the slogans the protesters were singing: they were just as likely to hold back a group of fracking protesters as they were those calling for the halt to the pursuance of Julian Assange – in their eyes they were all part of the same movement and so should be treated the same.

The experience recalled, for me, the distinction made by Norbert Elias (1994) of in-group/out-group boundaries in Winston Parva – the fictionalised community in Leicestershire, England. Elias describes those who are part of a “ruling” class as defining themselves by a set of idealised characteristics and so defining the “outsiders” of this group by less favourable characteristics – and so the boundary between these two groups is defined by these characteristics. These kind of boundary definitions are typical of social movements, and have been observed across many different protest movements, particularly those involved with identity politics: Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992) about lesbian and feminist social movements posit that part of the definition of a social movement is the social, psychological and physical structures which establish differences between the challenging group and dominant groups. Just as in the judgements made by the police on the streets of London in my data, Taylor and Whittier also acknowledge that it is typically the dominant group which erects these boundaries (ibid, 1992:111). At the Million Mask March the dominant group: the police, define the boundaries between what is and is not a member of Anonymous – and so physically place themselves as a barrier between the public and the “challenging group” that is Anonymous. London residents, unmasked and in smaller groups could move freely through the line if they chose it, as could groups of foreign tourists and vehicular traffic if necessary, but larger groups of young men, often masked, wearing hoodies or scarves wrapped around their faces were cordoned and controlled. Similarly, and perhaps in response, the members of Anonymous define themselves in opposition to the police – where the police are intentionally stoic, organised and

authoritarian, the protesters are chaotic, disorganised and raucous. They are also physically opposed and separate: I observed numerous pockets of conflict, particularly at the 2015 protest, where activists would stand on one side of a road, and a line of police would stand resolute on the other – a stark demonstration of the oppositional relationship between the two groups.

So, the boundary definitions between Anonymous and the public could be defined as two-fold:

- 1) Physical appearance. The most obvious example being the masks, but other features of protest defined this difference such as placards, banners and leaflets. Typically, activists were dressed casually, in hoodies, khaki combat trousers or jeans. Though many were masked it was clear that a good deal of the activists were young males (stature, body shape, sound of their voice – being a few indicators), though there were still a significant number of female activists and a small, though not insignificant, number of activists were noticeably older.
- 2) Demeanour and actions. Actions such as singing, chanting and waving banners and placards were clear actions which would define you as a member of Anonymous at the protest. Similarly, moving as a large group – more than two or three - would cause the police line to close before the individuals could move through. More antagonistic indicators might also be lining up opposite the vanguard of police, throwing missiles such as fireworks, rocks and stones at the police or, indeed, at significant landmarks such as Downing Street which the protest must pass in their march from Trafalgar to Parliament.

So, despite the claim that the only requirement for membership of Anonymous was participation, and in my attendance, I could be seen to be part of the group – by the definition given by the ruling group – i.e., the police, I was not seen to be part of the protest. In 2015 the police gave their perhaps most explicit contribution towards the establishment of these boundaries: a flyer handed out to those attending the protest which detailed several

stipulations about the expectations that the police force would have for the activists with regards to the cooperation between them and the police force, their expected conduct and what repercussions they might face if the actions of the activists contravened these expectations. The flyer given to attendees of the Million Mask March, a new tactic for the police in 2015, is indicative of the changing nature of this recurring event over the years of my attendance. Since I began attending the march in November 2013 I have seen a significant increase in violent clashes between police and protesters and perhaps in response to, or because of this violence, I have also noticed a parallel increase in police activity.

POLICE INFORMATION

Million Mask March

Thursday 5th November 2015
LONDON

IMPORTANT

Section 12 Public Order Act 1986 Section 14 Public Order Act 1986

In order to prevent serious disruption to the life of the community and/or serious disorder, the following conditions have been placed upon this event:

1. Any static assembly can only be held at the following locations:
 - Trafalgar Square
 - In the area in the centre of Parliament Square (known as Parliament Square Gardens)
 - In the barriered area on the East Footway of Whitehall, opposite Downing Street (known as Richmond Terrace). **See map overleaf.**
2. Any assembly held at any of these three locations will start no earlier than 1800 hours and conclude no later than 2100 hours
3. The march will commence from Trafalgar Square and must stay within the area bounded by Trafalgar Square, Northumberland Avenue, Victoria Embankment, Bridge Street, St Margaret Street, Abingdon Street, Millbank (up to junction with Great Peter Street), Great Peter Street (up to junction with Great Smith Street), Broad Sanctuary, Parliament Square, Parliament Street, Whitehall. **See map overleaf.**
4. The march must take not commence before 1800hrs
5. The march must not continue after 2100hrs
6. The participants must follow the directions of a constable even if the route is varied.
7. There will be no motor-vehicles as part of the procession.

If you take part in the Million Mask March today you must adhere to these conditions, failure to do so may lead to **arrest** and **prosecution**.

Figure 6 Leaflet produced by the Metropolitan Police and distributed on November 5th, 2015 picture credit to myself

4.2 The Changing Nature of the Million Mask March

The above-pictured leaflet is one of the many methods used by the police attendant at the Million Mask March to control the activity of protesters at the Million Mask March. This flyer, however, was only brought into play in 2015, in the fourth rendition of the march, and my third-year attending.

During my first attendance in 2013 the police presence was comparatively light, and despite the vast crowds milling around Trafalgar, the interactions between police and protesters was largely light-hearted and convivial. Protesters were playing dance music over a large stereo in the centre of the crowd, and occasionally an officer would push to the centre and request that they turned it off – they would oblige, but shortly after it would be turned back on. This process repeated a several times before the crowd moved off Trafalgar and commenced the march.

The police cordon around the march in 2013 was loose, a line of police officers in uniform followed the crowds and gathered at salient points where conflict would occasionally flare: notably the entrance to Downing Street. There were still clashes between protesters and police, but these were largely isolated incidents. The front of the crowd was prevented from rushing too far ahead of the police presence by a blockade of police vans which controlled the speed of their approach to Parliament Square, but turned off once they reached this destination, leaving the crowd to spill out onto the green. The police attempted to isolate protesters on Parliament square with loose lines of officers at every exit – but in general there was much more free-flow of groups and individuals in and out of the protest proper.

Contrasting this with the MMM in the years which followed I observed a marked ramping-up of the ferocity of police activity surrounding the march, perhaps in response to or maybe even becoming the reason for an increasingly chaotic, antagonistic and violent nature of the march

itself. As an example, in 2014, my second year attending the march, the police presence on Trafalgar Square was much more pronounced, and instead of simply have a presence on the square the police had set up a loud speaker system to communicate their messages to the crowd. Periodically, a voice could be heard over the crowd:

“We have a duty to uphold the law! This is an unlicensed event!”

Occasionally switched out for:

“Police have obtained a Section 60 AA power which allows officers to order protesters to remove masks”

Whenever this message was broadcast over the crowd a great cacophony of jeers, boos and shouting would come in response from the masses on the Square. Similarly, the police presence around the entire crowd was much more pronounced – including a double-line of officers guarding Downing Street, and metal barriers erected around the green on Parliament Square.

This increase in police activity was even more pronounced in 2015, my final attendance at the event before I drew my data collection to a close. The loudspeaker on Trafalgar Square was replaced, this time by a perpetually scrolling message projected in 6 feet high green letters onto the front façade of the national gallery (see Figure 5 below) communicating much the same information to the crowds:



Figure 7 A scrolling message on the side of the national gallery November 2015 picture credit to myself

The presence of riot-gearred police officers was also much more noticeable during the 2015 iteration of the march, and there almost constant clashes between protesters and the police lines which formed to control their movements. Below is an image of the line of police equipped with shields and batons protecting the entrance to The Mall, which is just off Trafalgar Square.



Figure 8 Police in armour, helmet and shields guard the entrance to the Mall November 2015 picture credit to myself

At Parliament Square, lines of protesters squared off against lines of police officers. Missiles were thrown, and in response the police line would charge, breaking up the line of protesters and attempting to apprehend specific individuals. Figure 7 below shows one of these charges in process:



Figure 9 Police officers attempt to apprehend a protester November 2015 picture credit to myself

In comparison to the protest held in 2013, the actions of both the protesters and police at the Million Mask March 2015 were far more antagonistic, militaristic and combative. There were still groups there related to specific issues, such as fracking and badger culling, but there was a significant section of the activists that had no more intention than to engage in conflict with the police.

In 2013 the Evening Standard reported that 13 people were arrested during or following the Million Mask March (<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/anonymous-protests-in-london-15-arrested-after-clashes-with-police-at-buckingham-palace-8923719.html>) in 2014 there was a reported 10 arrests, the Huffington Post reported that during the 2015 protests the number of arrests made rose to 49 during the event and three men arrested later for separate counts of criminal damage, common assault and drug offenses – additionally, three police

officers were injured, and a police vehicle was set ablaze (Allegretti, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/11/05/million-mask-march-london-2015-arrests-protest-traffic-square-parliament_n_8480438.html). Though I did not attend the 2016 event, reports from the BBC show that 53 protesters were arrested for various events on November 5th.

On the ground in 2015, the crowd was noticeably more incendiary than previous years. Periodically, cries would go out that the police are coming, and that the crowd should try going down this road or that to “*cut them off*” or should not cross the bridge because you would be surrounded by police on the other side. Totally separate from the “market stall” issue-led protest of 2013, 2015 quickly became a running conflict with the Metropolitan Police of London. I observed several incidents where protesters engaged with members of the public, one such an event occurred when a young male protester jumped out from behind his friends to startle an elderly couple who were walking by – the masked male then walked away laughing with his friends. I observed several such events, which though they were not unknown during previous years – certainly happened with more frequency during the 2015 event. Unravelling the cause and effect of this relationship between the expanded police activity and the increased violence and explosivity of the Million Mask March, approaching the subject as an observer on the ground as I was, was perhaps outside of the realms of this project, although the Chief Superintendent Pippa Mills of the Metropolitan Police did state that “*This year we have strong reason to believe that peaceful protest is the last thing on the minds of many of the people who will come along.*”

(http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/11/05/million-mask-march-london-2015-arrests-protest-traffic-square-parliament_n_8480438.html) prior to the event. It is difficult to say whether an increased police presence at any of the previous years’ events would have led to more violence or, indeed, more arrests as a result.

This changing nature of the Million Mask March runs parallel to the fractured nature of the march itself – there is no central message, all are noticeably anti-establishment, anti-government and, in some cases, anti-police, but I believe that labelling the Million Mask March as relating to any one of these causes would be to misunderstand the length and breadth of issues at play on those cold November evenings. It is the space between those issues where the incendiary spark of the march resides. Where, as CSI Pippa Mills noted *“peaceful protest is the last thing on the minds of many of the people who will come along”*, they are individuals and groups which attend to use the anonymity of the crowd to engage in conflict with the police, and there is no more anonymous crowd than that at the Million Mask March – cloaked and masked as they are.

My years attending the Million Mask March where punctuation points across the four years of data collection. They were also a significant learning experience – and highlighted to me that my initial question as to whether Anonymous could be considered a “Collective Digital Identity” might be too limited a question, or rather, that the answer is very clearly: no, they cannot.

A phenomenon which can just as easily encompass the tricksterism of the online attacks on Sony, Scientology and other issues perceived as impinging on freedom of information, as it could encompass the chaotic and varied presentation at the Million Mask March, and yet all be understood to be part of Anonymous, as the couple on the street told me *“well, they’re here aren’t they”* surely could not be explained by a single collective identity. Instead, I was forced to broaden my horizons in terms of paradigms through which I might understand this fractured and tumultuous movement, the next chapter – concerning the results of my online observation and interviews with self-identified members of Anonymous will build upon this idea of the fractured and often conflictual nature of Anonymous, how these conflicts can be seen in the very varied presentation of the three distinct Anonymous related communities I

studied in depth and how this information led me to conclude that rather than considering Anonymous to be a collective identity, I believe Anonymous should be considered a Social Movement.

5.0 Masks and Anonymity

On November the 5th in the United Kingdom it is traditional to build a bonfire, construct a crude guy from old clothes, stuffing and sticks and then gather with friends and family to burn the effigy and set off fireworks. This ritual is to commemorate the real-life event concerning what is known as the “Gunpowder Plot”, “Gunpowder Treason Plot” or the “Jesuit Treason” – whereby a group of English Catholics lead by Robert Catesby attempted to blow up the English House of Lords during the State Opening of Parliament in November 1605. The “guy” burned on the pyre is supposed to represent the most famous member of Catesby’s co-conspirators – Guy Fawkes.

This event is paralleled in Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s 1988 comic book series *V for Vendetta*. Set in a dystopian near-future Britain, the titular V attempts to incite revolution amongst the British public, now ruled by the brutally fascist Norsefire party. Through an anarchistic campaign of home-grown terrorism; V seeks revenge on his former captors and an end to the fascist government. The denouement of the series comes when V succeeds where Robert Catesby and Guy Fawkes failed, by blowing up the Houses of Parliament. Throughout the film V sports a long black cape, a 17th century conical hat and a smiling white mask with theatrical black moustache and goatee.

The series was made into a feature length film by Warner Brothers in 2006. The graphic novel and subsequent film is the origin of the V mask which has become a symbol of the Anonymous movement, but it is not directly from the film that Anonymous chose to use the mask as a symbol. The route the mask took before it became a symbol of the Anonymous movement is more circuitous than that. How the pale visage of Guy Fawkes came to represent a spirit of anti-establishment activism, anonymity and tricksterism is the topic of this chapter.

The data from which this chapter is drawn was collected over three years of ethnographic

observation across several Anonymous-related communities, and a combination of group and one-to-one interviews with self-identifying members of Anonymous drawn from these communities. What follows will be a brief history of the mask symbol as it transferred from film, to meme, to icon of activism. After that I will present how I have observed the mask is used today, and what that might mean it has come to represent.

5.1 Epic Fail Guy

In 2006 a thread appeared on the controversial website 4chan's "/b/ (random)" imageboard featuring a character which would eventually bring the mask symbol into the consciousness of 4chan, and eventually Anonymous. The thread featured a series of images portraying a hapless stick figure character whose sole purpose in life seemed to be to fail at every endeavour he embarked upon. As with many authors of threads on 4chan, the originator of this series of crudely drawn stick figure comics is unknown – 4chan gives its users the opportunity to contribute anonymously, a feature which most the sites' users capitalise upon. Regardless, the character became known as "Epic Fail Guy" due to his propensity for bad luck and failure, in time this name came to be abbreviated simply to EFG. On September 30th, 2006, an EFG thread emerged in which EFG finds a "V for Vendetta"-style Guy Fawkes mask in a rubbish bin.

Of course, in true EFG style, he only finds the mask because of his own failure; he begins the thread asking users to join him in a fail-proof task where he will use Microsoft Paint to paint his favourite foods, beginning with a taco, which he draws but then promptly drops on the ground, he retrieves the bin to clean up his mess and he finds the mask inside. Over time Epic Fail Guy began to appear in threads only ever wearing his white V mask.

When what would become known as the Chanology movement began in 2008 Anonymous protestors chose to appear outside of scientology locations wearing the V mask as an

unspoken way of telling scientologists that they, just like EFG, were a failure of epic proportions. So, whilst the image of the mask might have originally come from the graphic novel and resulting Hollywood movie, it became a tool for Anonymous by means of a collective joke at the expense of their opponents. This origin is perhaps fitting considering Anonymous' propensity towards tricksterism.

Prior to the use of the V mask, the symbol for Anonymous had most often been a faceless male in a black suit, often either with a question mark for a head or else sporting vibrant green skin. During the raids on the social media game Habbo hotel in July 2006 many Anons created identical characters: black suit, black afro and black shades to cause chaos in the game by physically blocking access to areas of the game world, and abusing other users. After the proponents of Chanology began to don the mask for their protests, the mask quickly became a potent symbol in the movement. In much of the iconography of Anonymous the two symbols (the black suit and the white mask) are combined to create a whole character, and Anons will often attend protests in full costume – complete with red or black tie.



Figure 10 From "Anonymous" on Anonymous Official YouTube Channel
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72J2GxYQBLo>

An often-overlooked point concerning the V mask symbol is that the copyright for the image itself is officially owned by Time Warner, following their production of the V for Vendetta movie in 2006.



Figure 11 a woman cleans a V Mask at a production line in Rio de Janeiro 28th June 2013. Image curtesy of Reuters
<http://www.businessinsider.com/where-the-guy-fawkes-masks-come-from-2013-11?IR=T>

“Official” V masks are produced by Rubie’s Costume Company, which are a worldwide designer, producer and distributor of Halloween costumes and accessories. The V mask is currently their top selling mask – outselling their Batman, Harry Potter and Star Wars lines. Speaking to the New York Times, executive vice president of Rubie’s Howard Beige stated that they sell well over one hundred thousand V masks a year, compared to roughly five thousand of any other mask (Bilton, 2011:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/technology/masked-anonymous-protesters-aid-time-warners-profits.html?_r=2&ref=technology). Each mask sells for roughly \$6 depending upon the retailer and for each mask sold a percentage of the profits goes to Warner Brothers. Ironically, Anonymous have had numerous and extensive conflicts with the Motion Picture Association of America of which Time Warner, and so their subsidiary Warner Brothers Pictures, are a member.

The masks are mass produced in factories in Asia and South America.

Official retailers are not the only means to acquire the mask, however. The V mask is available from a multitude of sources, in a dazzling array of designs, colours – some dyed another colour entirely, some black, red, blue or even a reflective golden chrome.

Additionally, there are also blueprints available for download on the internet which allow users to print out and construct their own mask from scratch. So, whilst there is a certain irony to the corporatisation of the production of this anti-establishment symbol, there are ways that wearers have found to circumvent the requirement to contribute to the system.

My research has necessarily covered 3 years, commencing in 2013 and drawing to a close in 2016, the mask began to emerge as a symbol of the movement 5 years before I even began to study Anonymous academically and just as the movement has changed in my 3 years of study (let alone the time between 2008 and the present day) so too has the usage and perception of the white V mask changed in that time.

As I stated in the early part of this chapter, the mask began life with the movement as a simple joke – a way to visually send a message to detractors and opponents alike.

The largest social media outlet for Anonymous related information: the twitter feed @youranonnews (with a follower list numbering over 1.66m at time of writing) have moved away from using the mask symbol as their icon, they have instead moved back to the green faced man in a suit which was the original symbol of the Anonymous movement before the Chanology operations in 2008.

In addition to the moving of major social media representatives back towards the original iconography of Anonymous, the symbol of the mask has itself been subject to a certain amount of ridicule. Take for example a popular viral .gif which emerged on an imageboard around 2013 depicting a serious mask-clad hacker creating what appears to be an Anonymous “manifesto” or “warning” video, but he is interrupted when his mother walks into his room,

switches the light on to bring him some snacks. This kind of depiction of the mysterious mask-clad anon being no more than children or else immature adults is a common trope amongst those who poke fun at the brand of activism with which Anonymous engage. This is, however, par for the course – if one of Anonymous' greatest tools is its ability to poke fun at absolutely anything then that must include themselves, and that necessarily includes an ability to turn their critical comedic eye inwards.

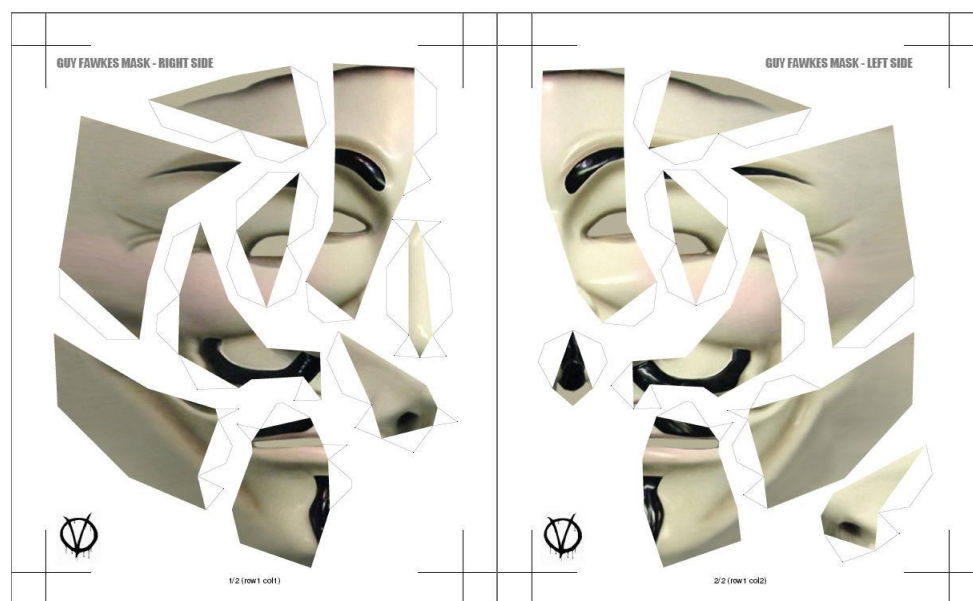


Figure 12 A do-it-yourself V-mask template. Courtesy of anon0064 at WhyWeProtest

The Anonymous mask has a dual existence. On the one hand, it is a physical object, it must be designed, produced, distributed and sold, and once purchased (or, indeed, constructed by the user themselves) it serves just as any other mask does: to cover one's face. On the other hand, it is a powerful symbol, it denotes innumerable abstract concepts: anonymity, anarchy, solidarity, camaraderie, non-conformity, conflict and chaos. The following chapter will be split along these lines: the physical and the abstract existence of the mask – these two existences will necessarily overlap in places, and I will draw attention to these areas of overlap when they emerge; for example, where the mask is worn by an activist at a protest it is also in service as a symbol to those around them, when it serves as an anon's avatar on a forum it is both a physical mask of their identity to other users and outside attention, and also

a symbol of all the concepts listed above. It would be overly simple to limit the mask to a physical existence in the real (offline) world and to limit the power of the mask as a symbol to the online world – though that is a temptingly neat dichotomy to draw upon. I believe that the symbol, in fact, remains powerful when it is employed in the offline world, and similarly the mask can be used online just as it is used in the real world: that is to obscure the identity of the user. Both uses: the physical and the symbolic, are central to the ethos of Anonymous, this chapter will attempt to show how the white V mask and the anonymity it affords, are used within the Anonymous movement.

5.2 Masks at the March

The presentation of Anonymous at the Million Mask March, how that event has changed and how it has changed Anonymous has been covered in an earlier chapter, this chapter specifically will focus on the use of the mask in protests, how Anonymous has used their mask and what that might mean for the movement. This chapter will necessarily draw salient examples from the biggest Anonymous protests in the UK which is the Million Mask March – as this was the best chance for me to observe the physical use of the mask which emerged during my data collection - but I will attempt to eliminate as much crossover between these chapters as possible, where there is a repetition of concepts from the MMM chapter it will be simply to emphasise the importance of the point.

Masked protest is by no means a modern invention. One of the important progenitors of the contemporary digital activist aesthetic, the Zapatista movement heavily used masks during their protests, most famously ski masks. Indigenous men and women wore black ski masks called *pasamontañas* – but they argued that rather than wearing masks so that they could not be seen, they wore them to ensure the opposite: they wore the masks to ensure they *were* seen:

“The Zapatistas wear masks as a rejection of traditional representative politics and individual identity in favour of direct democracy, equality and to undermine hierarchy and authoritarianism.”

(London Mexico Solidarity Group, 2015)



Figure 13 This sign reads: “You are in Zapatista Territory. Here the people lead and the good government obeys. Central Zapatista Heart of the Highlands zone” Picture courtesy of The Network for Police Monitoring: <https://netpol.org/2015/11/02/ezln-masks/>

Covering their faces ensures that the Zapatistas are not judged on the merits of their individual identities, but the political weight of the movement. Wearing the masks lends the movement a degree of power in their Anonymity.

In 2012, following some of the largest student protests in Canadian history, the Canadian government banned the use of masks during protests – the punishment for breaking this law is a maximum of 10 years in prison. In *“Masked Protest in the Age of Austerity”* Jennifer Speigel (2015) notes that in fact masks were not hugely prevalent amongst activists at these protests, rather they tended to sport red squares (indicative of the public service austerity package placing students and other citizens “squarely in the red” – i.e., in debt). The masks were, nonetheless, considered by the Canadian government to be such a threat that they

were worth legislating against.

In contrast to the protestors campaigning against austerity in Canada in 2012, Anonymous protestors are almost unanimously masked at their rallies. Walking amongst the crowd, uninitiated as I was at the Million Mask March at the end of 2013, was a relatively disconcerting experience. Almost every individual in the roughly 1500 strong mass of people at Trafalgar square at least carried a mask. Masks hung lazily from the back of rucksacks, strapped around the top of the head or around the neck or else they were worn. Whilst there were roughly 1500 people in the crowd, there were at least another one thousand lifeless faces worn or else carried by the protestors that night. Cold as British wintertime is, most also wore hoods, scarves, hats or else thick coats and boots, many, perhaps unintentionally mirroring the Mexican Zapatistas, wore bandanas or balaclavas – and sporting also a pale white mask an Anonymous protestor in full regalia can be somewhat imposing. For many at the start of the protest however, social interaction took precedence over anonymity and for roughly half of the attendees that meant the mask was not worn to allow conversations between friends and acquaintances.

In fact, the white mask is not the only mask worn at the Million Mask March. I observed a massive array of different face coverings, from rubber masks of politicians (Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan etc); to military-style gas masks, hockey masks as well as simply thick scarves or coloured bandannas wrapped around the bottom half of the face, often coupled with dark glasses or goggles. Additionally, there are innumerable custom V masks: some are pitch black, others chrome, silver or gold coloured. Some are fluorescent or glow in the dark. Some wear V masks cut from paper or cardboard tied around the head with string – these masks have trouble surviving the November weather and in the persistent rain of the 2015 protest some attendees surrendered their masks to the gutter. The standard white plastic mask was the most prevalent, however. I believe this shows that it is not, in fact, the image of

the white mask that is most important in this instance – rather it is the act of obscuring your identity using a mask, the protection this affords and the theatricality of such an act. Not only do the masks have the effect of concealing the individual identity of the wearer, but they also have the effect of producing a uniformity amongst the protesters which encourages a sense of shared intention, presentation, theatricality and camaraderie between the largely anonymised crowds. Though the masks might differ greatly in their appearance, the crowd is nonetheless united in their anonymity – an idea which pervades much of the rhetoric which surrounds Anonymous. To uninitiated onlookers and perhaps more importantly, to members of the police force in attendance (or else observing over the many CCTV cameras), one masked protester in isolation is as notable as any other. If an activist wished to evade the attention of the police, they need only to back into the crowd of masked faces and either switch masks or else remove the mask entirely.

The masks at the Million Mask March are a temporary identity – worn only for that night, and only when part of the protest. Each of the three years I attended the Million Mask March, I noticed that approaching Trafalgar Square (where the protest began), on the tube station platform, the tube itself, the surrounding shops, bars and the streets themselves there was not a single masked individual. It was not until the anons reached the relative safety of the crowd that they donned the masks, and as soon as they wished to leave the protest, the mask was removed and they became much like any other tourist, businessperson or native Londoner on the streets that night – affording them perhaps an entirely different type of mundane anonymity. As a temporary identity, the masks could be discarded at a moment's notice, changing the individual from an instantly recognisable member of Anonymous into a literal face-in-the-crowd, and just as indistinguishable from the other onlookers as the masked individuals were from their masked comrades.

5.3 Masks and the police.

Spiegel notes that during the protests in Canada the authorities connected masked protestors with the threat of violence and criminal behaviour:

“...the head of Montreal’s police union appealed to the ubiquitous good protestor/bad protestor divide: ‘The objective for us is to catch these trouble-makers before the situation spirals out of control, so that others, including families with children, can protest in peace and security.’ The justification offered by Montreal’s Mayor Gerald Tremblay: ‘When your cause is just and your intentions are good, why hide your face or refuse to give your itinerary to police?’”

(Spiegel, 2015:790)

This statement mirrors those made by Chief Superintendent Pippa Mills regarding the Million Mask March that “...peaceful protest is the last thing on the minds of many of the people who will come along”(http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/11/05/million-mask-march-london-2015-arrests-protest-traffic-square-parliament_n_8480438.html, 2015). At the final Million Mask March I attended in November 2015, the police projected a message onto the front of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square in large green letters which read:

“Please observe public order act restrictions. Failure to comply may result in arrest and prosecution. Officers may require you to remove face coverings. Failure to comply is an offence.”

The message scrolled across the front of the gallery, projected from a station manned by several officers in front of the building. The mask was not specifically mentioned by police in

previous years, though they had tried other methods of controlling or quelling the crowds (such as the loudspeaker in 2014 which broadcast a warning message to all protestors that they were participating in an unsanctioned protest – which a large majority of the crowd appeared to find deeply funny). The police information notice issued before the march in 2015 also failed to mention the mask, instead focussing on the physical spaces which the marchers were permitted to occupy and the time it would start and finish (see Figure 2). The scrolling message on the front of the national gallery is the first acknowledgement by the police that the masks are an important component of the protesters' power over the engagement with the authorities. If a great deal of comportment of behaviour is derived from the perceived accountability of individuals who might be tempted to commit criminal or at least disruptive acts on the streets, then a complete face covering at least complicates the application of that accountability, and alters the individual's perception of their own accountability in a situation. I did not observe any police officers demanding that individuals remove their masks, so I cannot comment on the reaction which might have followed but in general, for Anonymous, requests to effectively strip away the barriers of identity obfuscation (such as claims by various authorities that they would digitally and, indeed, physically “unmask” Anonymous members via revealing their personal identity) are generally met with mockery from the community and I can imagine that the reaction would be much the same from the Anons on the streets of London as it would be on the forums, chat feeds and social media platforms on the internet. Certainly, whatever measures that the police attempted to impose over the protesters on the streets were ultimately met with derision and often attempts to combat or “drown out” the attempts at control - such as the police loud speaker used in 2014 having to contend with the ever-increasing volume of the music coming from various stereos placed around the crowd.

The scrolling message on the side of the gallery was an acknowledgement by the police that

the masks are an important tool of the Anonymous protester – regardless of the symbolism of the white V image, any mask which covers the face physically protects the user from repercussions which might come from their actions during the protest, it hinders the police in identifying trouble-makers in the crowd either at the time of the protest or after-the-fact from closed circuit television (being so proliferate in major UK cities and particularly in the centre of London). Therefore, there were increased attempts by the metropolitan police during the 2015 protest to tackle agitative elements of the crowds at the time in comparison to previous years – I observed far more aggressive crowd-control tactics by the police in 2015 than I had in any other year.

At the Million Mask March, the police were also often masked, or at least their identities were obscured. They were behind riot shields, wearing heavy helmets and, just like the Anonymous masses, they were shrouded by their numbers. They might not have been wearing theatrical masks, but they were, in effect – masked by their numbers and their riot gear. The impenetrable lines of riot police which formed each year to corral the protesters moved as a well-oiled single crowd-control unit, drilled in group formation, movement and positioning. Their own anonymity allowed them to act as a single immovable object – a line to stop the movement of crowds, a show of force and – particularly in 2015 – a battering ram used to break up unruly groups of protesters deemed to be in breach of the law or at the very least requiring splitting up.

Just like the masked protesters, however, if asked or engaged up close as individuals the police officers could be de-anonymised. Just as the police were within their rights to ask a protester to remove his or her mask, similarly, up close a protester might get a good look at an officer's unique badge number or even their face behind the gear. Again, however, engaged as a group this would not be possible (a single protester asking a line of riot police to read out their badge numbers in turn, but a single protester speaking to a single police officer – no

matter how heavily armoured or masked either individual was – would result in much more information flow between the two members of the dialogue).

The V mask itself sends a powerful message; it is fixed in an unflinching smirk, it seems to mock the viewer – not a full-blown laugh which would be bombastic, rather a quiet knowing grin which communicates a secret amusement which the wearer is drawing from the situation or opponents at hand. This is a feature of the physicality of the mask which crosses over from its symbolic power – the communication of Anonymous' trickster persona, the troll made flesh (or plastic, cardboard or papier mache). The bustling mass of pale-faced smirking Anons standing outside churches of scientology, on the streets of Gaza or gathering in their thousands outside Parliament on November 5th is a moving and shifting embodiment of contempt, condescension and disrespect. This same trickster persona is communicated through their use of joke-esque or pun-based placards as mentioned in the Million Mask March Chapter 4. This symbolic mockery then, is perhaps not a feature of the mask, but of the face which the mask adopts, amplified by the sheer number of jeering faces which can comprise an Anonymous crowd.

5.4 Solidarity, Political Weight and Anonymity

David Lloyd who, alongside Alan Moore, created the original V for Vendetta graphic novel told the BBC:

"The Guy Fawkes mask has now become a common brand and a convenient placard to use in protest against tyranny — and I'm happy with people using it, it seems quite unique, an icon of popular culture being used this way,"

and

"My feeling is the Anonymous group needed an all-purpose image to hide their identity and symbolise that they stand for individualism - V for Vendetta is a story about one person against the system. "

(Lloyd, in Waites, 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15359735>).

Whilst I have shown that the white visage of V did not become the symbol for the Anonymous movement directly from the V for Vendetta graphic novel, the important symbolism of the story is undoubtedly the reason it has remained so. Just as in the story, the mask has come to represent a solidarity between those standing up against authority – the symbolism of the Million Mask March and its comparisons to the final scenes of the V for Vendetta story has been covered in the previous chapter – but there are other examples of how the mask has become a potent symbol for solidarity. Much of the rhetoric which surrounds the Anonymous movement is about the power of communal action. Flyers, posters and promotional material talk of “brothers” and “sisters” of Anonymous in arms against authority. The mask affords the lay-person the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves, but without the risk which might be associated with connecting your personal identity to a protest movement such as other anti-establishment, anti-globalisation or anti-capitalism movements. Malcom Gladwell, writing in the New Yorker in 2010, argues that this disregarding of the inherent risk associated with protest diminishes the efficacy of the movement. Gladwell compares the Anonymous protests to the race-rights protests of the 1960s, arguing that the sacrifices made by the black Americans who took to the street in protest lend their cause a political weight which the Anonymous movement does not have due to the protection afforded by their anonymity. Gladwell brings in Clay Shirky's “Here Comes

Everybody” (2008) to support this claim – Shirky argues that the nature of online activism is such that it facilitates *“weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger”* (Gladwell, 2010).

Protesters are not risking anything if they participate anonymously, and they can drop-in and drop-out of the movement without any repercussions or backlash. The sum of these parts, he argues, is that the Anonymous movement is indicative of a lazy, shallow and ineffective form of post-modern activism where participants can pick and choose their cause and flit between their causes as easily as they might change the television channel or web-page. Whilst this type of activism might *“make it easier for activists to express themselves”* - facilitated as they are by communication and social media technology – it makes it *“...harder for that expression to have any effect”*.

What Gladwell here argues is Anonymous' weakness – its low threshold for participation and its risk-averse nature afforded by the masks (both online and offline, practical and symbolic) worn by its participants – many within the movement would argue are its strengths. The anonymity afforded by the mask gives participants flexibility, ephemerality and a feeling of freedom when acting as an individual, and the safety of numbers when acting as a crowd. One participant I interviewed directly intimated a definition of Anonymous activity which counters Gladwell's assertion that the low participation threshold necessarily means less political weight. Participant B, who asked not to have their username documented here, highlighted the advantage of the anonymous nature of the activity of the movement:

Interviewer: *Why do you think it is important to be part of Anonymous?*

B: *I do not think it is important to be part of Anonymous, I think its fun. I do, however, believe Anonymous is important in that it provides am (sic) effective collective action counter vector to the increasing individuation of western society. The number one means of derailing*

collective action is to eliminate the individuals seen as the main instigators. This is not possible, or, at least, far more difficult, within the Anonymous paradigm. Accordingly, Anonymous brings the power of collective action to issues deemed worthy of attention without, generally speaking, exposing the individuals involved.

B here argues that the anonymous nature of the activity of Anonymous is a response to the methods by which established groups might seek to destabilise the movement, and in a broader sense, a response to the “*increasing individualisation of western society*”. B refers to “*the Anonymous paradigm*”, referring to the diffused responsibility, the non-existent hierarchy and ephemerality of the movement, but equally the Anonymous paradigm could mean just what their name suggests: power through anonymity, as the anonymous nature which typifies most if not all activist activity associated with Anonymous protects the individuals involved, hiding them behind the V mask in person, and pseudonymous nature of online interaction when in cyberspace.

The concept that the decentralised and unidentifiable nature of Anonymous is a strength rather than a weakness is one which was mirrored by Ryan Ackroyd in his lecture “*50 days of LULZ: The Life and times of Lulzsec*” (2014). Ackroyd began hacking as a child with the strategy game Command and Conquer, this fascination with hacking would lead him towards a pastime as a black-hat hacker who was part of the Anonymous offshoot: Lulzsec, which was a thorn in the side of cybersecurity agencies for a few months in 2010. Ackroyd was eventually caught, tried and went to prison for his involvement with several high-profile hacks.

In his lecture, Ackroyd emphasises the fast-pace at which the movement could operate: working in tandem with several other hackers he could work his way through the defences of

a server whilst his colleagues and co-hackers worked on their plans as to what they might do with the information once they were in. Once the defences were down, Ryan would stand back and let his colleagues go to work, he was only really interested in the challenge of breaking into the server, not the information that could be found behind. Ryan began by describing Operation Payback, a series of hacks conducted by Anonymous, related supporters of internet piracy and free information activists. He described how social media was used for instant communication – allowing the group to quickly and, perhaps most importantly, unpredictably, pick targets and carry out attacks on large organisations. Following the leak of the US diplomatic cables by the WikiLeaks organisation and the subsequent punitive actions by companies such as Amazon and PayPal against them, Operation Payback also expanded to support the actions of WikiLeaks and to strike back against the companies who withdrew their support.

Ackroyd also discussed the details of Anonymous and Lulzsec in 2010: following Operation Payback, the CEO of cybersecurity firm HB Gary Federal – Aaron Barr – made a statement in the financial times that they would identify the people involved in Operation Payback and “*Unmask the leaders of Anonymous*” – at the mention of this assertion, most of the audience allowed themselves a knowing chuckle. He then asked the group if anyone followed the news surrounding Anonymous – it was clear that most of the group present had a good grasp of the talk surrounding Anonymous, and what they claim to be. He quickly gave a run-down: leaderless, decentralised and no membership list. It was, then, laughable that someone might claim to be able to “unmask” the leaders of Anonymous, as there were none. To put it bluntly, Mr Aaron Barr, Ackroyd claims: “...*made a few mistakes*”. For a cybersecurity agency, Ryan says, HB Gary Federal’s own security was minimal.

HB Gary’s cybersecurity set-up was vulnerable to an SQL injection (a technique which exploits a website or server which does not check the text which a user is feeding them, and

allows users to run their programs on the target's computer). Ryan described this as *“the bottom of the bottom of vulnerabilities. It takes no effort at all to sanitise input in a PHP script but for a cybersecurity company they cannot audit their own source code apparently, it's a nightmare you know.”*

On the back of this simple SQL injection attack, the Lulzsec hackers could harvest the user database, collect all the attached passwords. Quickly, they gained access to Aaron Barr's password (which contained no capital letters, only 8 characters and no special characters). He also used the same password for every service they encountered; including his World of Warcraft account (access to which they exploited to the fullest, flushing his digital items down the drain). Aaron Barr was also the admin of the company's Google Apps account, which gave him access to all the company emails (at that time numbering over 70000) all of which were leaked onto the internet.

Ryan states that the damage to the company was massive. From the first SQL injection, the further and further they went into the company's digital assets, the worse it became – passwords were recycled almost everywhere. One terabyte of company data was wiped out, 70000 emails were stolen from the Google Apps account, their website was defaced and their company database leaked onto the internet. All of this occurred in response to claims that HB Gary would take steps to “unmask” Anonymous, and all of this facilitated by the anonymity afforded by that mask.

The actions of Anonymous members are also not without risk, as Gladwell would argue, some of their most prominent computer hackers have been given or face lengthy prison sentences: the most recent example of which might be Derek Lostutter (alter ego “KYAnonymous”) who faces a 16 year prison sentence for hacking the website “RollRedRoll.com” wherein he found videos relating to a rape-case located in Steubenville,

Ohio which he threatened to share with school faculty members and parents if the accused did not come forward and expose themselves. Lostutter faces a lengthy prison sentence of up to ten years and was due in court March 2017. Lostutter's accomplice in the hack on RollRedRoll.com, Noah McHugh, pleaded guilty to assisting in hacking the website and faces up to a year in prison and a \$100 000 fine. Anons are constantly aware of the risk of authority attention – the general advice being to maintain technical barriers between your personal computer and any online activity (such as using a virtual private network, using web-browsers which do not track your location such as The Onion Routing network and generally being aware not to reveal any personal information when interacting online and in real life). I observed a number of interactions on both the IRC channels #AnonOps and the popular Anonymous related forum “WhyWeProtest” where new or inexperienced users were lambasted for revealing personal information, or else attempting to participate in the community without taking steps to obscure their identity (both personally, via using pseudonyms and avatars, and technically, via use of virtual protocol networks (VPN) and the use of web browsers which afford more privacy to the user such as the Onion TOR Network).

This is a juncture where the online and the offline world converge – the mask is both a physical obfuscation of the face of a protester in a crowd for someone in the real world, and a symbolic obfuscation of the identity of an online protester when it is used as a placeholder for their real-world identity. Looking around a crowd of masked protesters, however, it is possible to see how the mask might not only serve to make identification difficult, but also serve to be an objective indicator of solidarity amongst other masked protesters. Activists at the MMM can easily identify another protester as a “brother in arms” from their donning of a mask, no other identifier is required as, in fact, wearing the mask and attending the protest is all that is required to be a part of Anonymous is the first place. As stated in the Million Mask March chapter, one interaction I had with Anonymous activists in 2014 illustrated this point

perfectly. I approached a couple, standing just off to the side of the protest – they were there as activists but their masks were hung by their sides as opposed to on their faces – they stood to the side of the swirling morass of human bodies which made up the bulk of the march. I asked if I could ask a few questions, and they were happy to oblige. One such question was: *“So how do you know who is part of Anonymous and who isn't?”*

to which the male of the two replied:

“Well they are, here aren't they? You're here as well, so you're part of it too”

I was not wearing a mask, but due to the cold weather I did have a thick scarf wrapped around the lower half of my face – and the anon pointed to my scarf as he informed me that I was part of the movement. At the time, I assured him that my ethics board may not be too happy to hear that I had accidentally “gone native” but looking back if the prerequisites for identifying a fellow activist were simply that they showed up, and in some way covered their face (and they were clearly not a member of the police force) then it is difficult to argue that by the tenets of Anonymous I was not inadvertently a member for that evening regardless of my original intentions. This idea was emphasised during my first group interaction with Anonymous members: I approached the Chanology related forum “WhyWeProtest” and during my initial interactions with the group someone posted the following picture:



Figure 14 protesters at the Million Mask March. Image credit to WhyWeProtest

As an aside I mentioned that *“if that is from the 2013 protest, I was there that night”* and in response I received the following message from one of the more active moderators for the website:

“So you're an Anon too then! You can interview yourself.”

The mask, therefore, is a tool that can be used to identify those on either side of the boundaries between those in the group and those outside the group. Each year at the Million Mask March there were numerous other individuals on the busy streets of London around rush hour, often they would be walking the very same route as the protests but would obviously not be a part of the march – an easy way to discern a protester from a member of the public, alongside expressing similar behavioural patterns as the other protesters, is the inclusion of the mask.

Just as other activists at the Million Mask March might easily identify other members of the movement on the streets of London via the use of the V-mask, so too do members of the online communities I observed use the mask to identify and identify with other members of their community. A great many of the individuals I encountered on forums such as AnonUK or WhyWeProtest used some variation of the V mask symbol as their online avatar, and used

usernames which include “Anonymous” or “Anon” in some way.

A great many of the individuals I spoke to, however, were very keen to emphasise that “wearing the mask” is enough to consider yourself part of Anonymous, but it should not be the only thing a person should do to contribute to the cause. Discussing the outward perception of Anonymous, one member of WWP who went by the rather lofty pseudonym “The Internet” stated:

“There’s a cargo cult view of Anonymous out there which focuses upon the media stylings associated with Anonymous --e.g., the Guy Fawkes mask and LOLcat memes. But that superficial stuff can be emulated by egofags pushing unverifiable nonsense --e.g., “What is the Plan?” which pushed NaturalNews conspiracies.

Anyone can be Anonymous. But one guy posting a YouTube with a Guy Fawkes mask and a computerized voice is not “the body politic.” You need a busy forum with many Anonymous people sharing ideas to see the emergent viewpoint called, “Anonymous.”

Science is an example of an emergent or third person viewpoint. Nobody really cares who Ohm was; it’s the relationship between voltage, current, and resistance that matters. Identity, not so much.”

“The Internet” here hints towards a more complex concept of Anonymous not as a group of individuals pursuing personal gain in some way, but rather as something coming into being when the network to which they are contributing becomes more complex and interconnected. They draw upon the common anon colloquial “egofag” (and in extreme cases “celebfag”) to refer to those who attempt to bolster their self-worth through their contribution to the Anonymous cause. They contrast the *“one guy posting a YouTube with a Guy Fawkes mask”*,

referring to the numerous videos on the YouTube video hosting site which claim to be “official” Anonymous content;



Figure 15 a screenshot from the "Official" Anonymous YouTube channel video "Anonymous"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf5D3uJHpJc>

with the activity at forums such as WWP which contribute to the cause more effectively through daily conversation, debate and through their attempts at awareness spreading. Here, the users at WWP protest brush against Gladwell’s assertion that the low threshold for participation limits the political weight of the movement – and perhaps even express opinions which fall in line with this assertion - but they argue that this limitation is mitigated if the anon capitalises on the anonymity afforded by the mask. For WWP the mask is a tool, and it must be used effectively, not frivolously or for personal gain – an effective contributor to the community should leverage the anonymity to achieve the aims of the group.

5.6 In conclusion: The Mask, Anonymity and Political Weight

The rejection of individual “egofags” is a common theme amongst all the communities I observed throughout the course of my data collection. Just as the Mexican Zapatista movement use the masks to throw off the limiting factors of individual politics and

representation, so too the use of the mask, the anonymity it affords, and the rejection of those who would attempt to hold themselves above others serves the same purpose for Anonymous.

Malcom Gladwell's assertion that the low threshold for participation represents the limiting factor for the movement because their arguments are stripped of their political weight when there is little risk involved, I believe, ignores the great practical and symbolic power anonymity itself lends the movement. Few other activist movements could claim to have an undefinable number of supporters, and as quickly mobilise a small crack group of highly technically proficient hackers such as Ryan Ackroyd and the other members of Lulzsec as it could the many thousands of masked protesters on the streets of London for the Million Mask March. I believe that this kind of flexibility is only made possible through Anonymous' utilisation of the mask both physically as a means by which anons might obscure their face and obfuscate their identity, and symbolically as a representation of their irreverent disregard for authority and the solidarity they feel for the masks individuals with which they collaborate.

The next chapter will move on to cover in depth the data I was able to draw from the interviews I carried out with self-identifying members of anonymous. The mask itself would begin to impact upon my own project here, as I too had to find out who was behind them to appreciate the complexity of the movement.

6.0 Observation and Interviews

This chapter will be primarily focused upon presenting the conclusions drawn from my interview and observation data from the three main Anonymous-related communities I spoke to as part of the ethnographic observation period of this project. Conducting observation and interviews with an entity such as Anonymous over a long period of time, beginning the project as I did in 2012 and drawing the data collection to a close early 2016, involves and almost necessitates developing a closeness and rapport with the communities with which you are involved. Whilst the early stages of the project involved a process of “finding my feet” within the space occupied by Anonymous both on and offline, time and resource constraints necessitated focussing upon three main communities through which to develop an understanding of Anonymous – these communities were chosen by the method detailed in the methodology and ethics section. The three communities studied were:

- 1) WhyWeProtest.com – a community concerned with sharing information and spreading awareness in support of Project Chanology: The Anonymous campaign against the church of scientology.
- 2) AnonUK – a now defunct forum set up in support of Anonymous members in the United Kingdom.
- 3) AnonOps IRC – an Internet Relay Chat channel which, at the height of Anonymous activity between 2008 and 2010 served as the main hub for communication and operations.

These three communities vary drastically in their presentation, the people associated with them and the beliefs they hold about what Anonymous is, how it should operate and what it should aim to achieve. When observing and interacting with these communities, I sought to

uncover and document these beliefs, the social norms and everyday interactions through which these communities are facilitated and ultimately understand the relationship that these drastically different groups of people had with the larger Anonymous phenomenon.

In total, I conducted one-on-one interviews with three participants, two from WhyWeProtest and one from AnonUK. As well as a group interviews with users at WhyWeProtest, and AnonUK, as well as gathering a great deal of observational data from all three sites. It is unfortunate I was not able to contact participants at the AnonOPs IRC directly for interviews, however, in line with the methodological choices made as detailed in my methods and ethics chapter, I chose a method of approach to these communities which would allow participants to identify themselves via a self-identification process. This method ensured that I was not imposing myself on any participants by approaching them directly, and allowing them to contact me if they felt they wanted to contribute to the research – this method proved more effective at some sites than others.

The first community I spent time with was WhyWeProtest.

6.1 WhyWeProtest – Chanology, The Importance of Information and The Role of Lulz

WhyWeProtest (WWP) is an online community which is focused on protesting against the church of scientology. The webpage itself consists of very little more than a standard internet forum format with boards to delineate each topic of conversation and threads within those boards posted by users of the forum. There is also a help page and a link to a page where visitors may donate to the cause. The site was founded in mid-2008 in response to and in support of “Project Chanology” which was the original Anonymous campaign against the church of scientology, and as recorded in “The History of WhyWeProtest” thread on the website:

“It has served as a place for the community to share information on Project Chanology, as well as providing a centralised planning platform. Since its founding, WhyWeProtest has grown and initiated planning and discussion in other pro-free speech areas. WhyWeProtest’s role has been to provide a stable platform to discuss legal methods of protest and information dissemination.”

(“The History of WhyWeProtest: <https://whyweprotest.net/threads/welcome-to-whyweprotest.111548/>)

The focus here on the clear assertion of “legal” and “pro-free speech” activity will become more important later, when this chapter discusses WWP’s opinion on methods, but suffice it here to say that approaching the community in 2014 I found that the above paragraph goes a long way to accurately depict the community at WWP. The post from which this paragraph was drawn goes on to warn new members that WWP is an off-shoot of Anonymous, and that Anonymous internet culture *“typically involves a lot of ‘memes’ and ‘trolling’”*.

Additionally, they warn that new users might find comments from existing community members *“overly harsh (if not visceral)”*, again – this is certainly an experience which I had when first approaching the community for interviews.

I began my approach by following the advice in the New Members Area: I introduced myself in the appropriate thread, and then moved to the *“Still Got Questions? Ask them here”* thread. Therein I posed the question *“what would be the most appropriate method to approach the community to take part in a research study?”*. A few users chimed in and I was linked to several threads created by other students and journalists who had approached the community

to study them, some of them within the past few months. I had expected this response, before approaching the community for the interviews I had spent several weeks observing the nature of the interactions between community members and making particular note of the way that they received requests for either academic or journalistic interactions – such that I might more appropriately shape my own approach. The advice I was offered in that first thread was “*lurk moar*” – meaning, if you want to learn, you need to continue to observe. Members of WWP use much of the irreverent idioms I observed at many of the other Anonymous-related communities. The “*New Members Area*” where they expect visitors to become acquainted with the site and the expected code of conduct, for example, includes a guide called “*Getting newfags started - requesting suggestions and advice*”. This was a language I was familiar with, having spent good deal of time observing several communities before settling on WWP, and the use of these terms made it clear from the outset that the community is closely linked to the culture of the other Anonymous communities I had observed before and have observed since then – there were, however, notable features of WhyWeProtest which set it apart from other such communities:

The important practical and social role played by *information* in the WhyWeProtest community was perhaps the most important point which emerged from my discussions and observation of the community. Whether it was collecting and sharing information, being critical of it or protective of it – “DOX” takes precedence above almost all things. In this context, DOX roughly means documentation or evidence to support a claim or assertion – not to be confused with another use for the phrase which might mean personal information held by a target of a “doxing” hack, whereby that personal information is stolen and shared online.

The importance of information was immediately apparent upon approaching the community. I had expected to be met with a level of resistance from users on the site, I had spent time around the forum for three weeks by the time I felt equipped enough to post my initial approach on the site, but I was also by no means the first researcher approaching the community. As expected, and as I had observed happening to the few journalists and other academic students who approached WWP during my observation period, the very first response I received when I posted my initial approach was a challenge posted by participant N:

“Are you doing anecdotal / qualitative research only?

Your Ph.D. dissertation surely can't be "What I read on the Internet and learned after talking to a few people who wouldn't tell me their names."

What is/are your hypothesis/-ses?

What's your data collection / analysis plan?

SRSLY, dude”

Followed by a response from a moderator with whom I had been in contact since I began my observation of the community, when I posted in the New Members Area:

“Hey will, you have presumably been lurking around wwp and know well enough to have a thick skin when it comes to responses from users here, right? 😊 ”

Thankfully, I had, and this kind of push-back was absolutely what I had expected. Over the course of the weeks I had been observing WWP I had seen several students approach the community looking to complete a paper, or researching for a presentation and each one had received a response as seen above. It is a response I had also seen across many other such communities associated with Anonymous. In fact, in comparison to some other responses I received from communities, this one was perhaps the most civil.

When faced with the potential roadblock, I felt equipped for participant N's initial rebuttal of my approach, I knew that first: I could not expect to win in an argument, and to engage in one with N would only play into the hands of an experienced troll. If I were to continue interacting with the community for the purposes of the study, however, I could not back down from such a challenge: so, I addressed each of N's questions, in turn, justifying my answers with literature where appropriate and apologising where I could not answer (such as the question of hypotheses when my use of the ethnographic method precludes such a thing). Shortly after I posted my response, N responded in kind:

"Grasshopper, your orals are going well.

I'd be happy to be interviewed. However, there are some topics and questions I would discuss privately that I won't say in public forums."

I took this to be an indication that I had passed the first test, I had not reacted to the mocking tone of N's "*SRSLY dude*", and had instead showed that I had done my research, and was equipped to interact with the users on the site. Equally, I had not crumbled under the pressure – I observed a few such interactions during my observations of the community: threads which

were started by a student earnestly looking to research Anonymous, and having been met with such a vociferous reaction in response, abandoned the thread in its nascent state.

Participant I stated their own response to my original approach:

“I confess I did not like you at first. Not because of you, but because of the familiar “I’m writing a paper” trope. In this trope, OP is always a faggot that needs to lurk moar. Actually, OP is so blinded by assumptions about Hackers on Steroids (sic) and the Internet Hate Machine, that the lurking probably would not help.

Typical OP questions in the “I’m writing a paper” trope:

- *Why is Anonymous so hateful toward the gay community?*
- *Why so racist?*
- *Why does Anonymous feel the need to hack the computers of the people they don’t like?*
- *Why does Anonymous want to rebel against the government, like in that movie V for Vendetta?”*

I agreed with participant I, insofar as a great many of the students, academics and journalists I observed approaching the community were relatively unprepared for what they might find once they found their quarry and abandoned their enquiries when they received the standard Anonymous welcome pack of a bombardment of questions posed in a mocking tone.

That does not mean that I was immediately accepted. Rather, I was still expected to show that I was academically prepared throughout, but I had at least taken the first step, and shortly after this first thread was posted, and this initial interaction with N passed, I received two

private messages on the forum's in-site messaging service from users who would be willing to be interviewed, but not in the public-facing forum.

Participant N's questioning of my academic aptitude in this way highlights two important features of the WWP community: their belief in the primacy of information, and their irreverent sense of humour.

First, the importance of information:

For the users of WhyWeProtest, information is a social lubricant; collecting, sharing and debating information seems to be the primary purpose of the community (in contrast to a community which is brought together over another metric such as geographical location such as the AnonUK community discussed later in this chapter).

In practical terms, this process of information sharing will usually take the form of sharing news articles, opinion pieces, new anti and pro scientology book releases, scientology document leaks (such as guidelines for scientologists posting to social media etc) and academic literature concerning, largely, the campaign against their opponent: the church of scientology. Typically, an article will be shared as a thread on one of the many boards the forum hosts: "*News and Current Events*", "*Scientology and Anonymous*", "*Leaks and Legal*" etc depending upon the content of the information they are posting, other users are invited to comment, critique or add to the discussion in the comments below the thread. Often a user will comment to share supporting information, perhaps a news article which backs up or even refutes the claims of the original post – but the aim is almost always the same: the facilitate the flow of information, and facilitate the users of WhyWeProtest in the interpretation of that information.

There are boards for arranging real-world protests and boards for debate and discussion on new tactics through which they might strike against scientology. There are also whole boards related to other Anonymous operations, such as those concerning the grassroots protest group OccupyWallStreet and one related to OpInnocence, which is an Anonymous operation concerned with combatting child pornography online – but on WWP the scientology-related board is undoubtedly the most active.

Participant N's interrogation shows that, as an outsider, I am not exempt from the same standards which they expect the other users on the site to adhere to: you must always be able to cite your sources, back up your claims with evidence and provide the documentation to do so if required. This point is highlighted later in the same thread by participant R, who perhaps most viscerally puts it:

“Anonymous is teaching me the value of the hard stop when the data just doesn't support the conclusion or the action, even if it means massive butthurt to me or someone else (and, as a socialfag, I hate butthurt). The collective and their focus on the DOX helps me get past my own unseen prejudices and preconceptions and, if I listen, will help keep me from stepping on my own dick.”

Put bluntly here is what I observed to be WWP's approach to data and information. Information should be spread and shared as widely as possible, even if it refutes one of your own beliefs, here R argues that being part of Anonymous has forced them to question their own beliefs in the face of evidence which contradicts them. They also emphasise the important *social* role that information plays in the community:

“...and, if I listen, will help keep me from stepping on my own dick.”

In the WWP community your ability to interpret, share, collect and analyse information is the measure by which you are judged. Make a claim that you cannot substantiate, post a source that you have not verified or, perhaps most egregious of all, attempt to spread misinformation and you will be subject to the ridicule of the community. This community belief is perhaps held so staunchly because of the nature of their opponent: the church of scientology; which many of the WWP users argue, will regularly post on the site to spread misinformation and erroneous “facts”. The church of scientology’s supposed propensity for misinformation is part of the reason why, shortly before my observation of the site commenced, they disabled the ability to post to the WWP forum anonymously. Having the right information “avoids embarrassment” – namely the embarrassment of being uninformed about a topic and either making incorrect assumptions or reiterating already well-known information.

Gabriella Coleman, in her talk *“Old and New Net Wars over Free Speech & Secrecy or How to Understand the Lulz battle against the Church of Scientology”* (2010) suggests the idea that scientology is such an appropriate adversary for Anonymous because they represent the opposite of that which Anonymous represents: where Anonymous are technologically proficient and embrace the flexible, chaotic and dynamic nature of modern technology, the church of scientology is anti-technology and teach a very restricted approach to engagement with modern technology, where Anonymous will regularly protest in support of freedom of speech and freedom of information, the majority of the church of scientology’s documentation is closely guarded and not available to the public, and they regularly seek to silence critics through the pursuit of court cases (it is the pursuance of such anti-freedom of

speech activities which originally spurred users at 4chan.com to organise the original protests against scientology, leading to the creation or “political birth” of Anonymous, which had previously been a group solely concerned with trolling and online mischief). Coleman argues that if you were to place the church of scientology a “cultural inversion machine” then the result upon output might very well resemble Anonymous (Coleman, 2010). This belief was certainly mirrored in the opinions of the WhyWeProtest users I spoke to, they emphasised that Anonymous is a potent tool in the fight against the church of scientology. Participant T here details their own realisation of the power and scope of the movement in opposition to scientology (here abbreviated to COS – the church of scientology):

“...using Scientology as an example. i came here thinking I knew the length and breadth of all the ills that the COS perpetrates. Thats a notion I soon abandoned as I read and was exposed to the full scope of the con. I was immediately humbled and impressed with the collective knowledge here on the subject, and haven't looked back since.”

Scientology are the ideal opponent for Anonymous and WhyWeProtest, because they represent everything WhyWeProtest do not – and so their focus upon the free-flow and critical reception of information is understandable, and indeed, a necessary tactic in combatting such an opponent.

In addition to, or perhaps because of, this overall focus on the primacy of information – there also comes scepticism and an emphasis on evidence-based judgements. I asked the users at WWP about what they believed their duties as an Anon were (in relation to WWP, but also to the Anonymous movement) many respondents emphasised not only information collection,

but also the rejection of assumptions which are not backed up by verifiable information. *“Try not to be a true believer of anything”* is how participant N put it, and this message resonates throughout the community: a readiness to reject any previously held beliefs if new information comes to light to refute them and the necessity for members to back-up their beliefs with evidence if they are to be taken seriously.

Participant W, about the responsibilities of Anons:

“Generally and in particular with regards to wwp, I would say bring news, research and ideas relevant to our collective interest/ objectives here for discussion and dissection. Also being prepared to have the backs of other anons should they be deserving, weather IRL or in an online setting.”

And participant I:

“We fight for freedom but we really ought to be fighting for good information. If we win that fight we'll have freedom as a bonus.”

Information exchange and scepticism seem to reflect the wider Anonymous movement that I had been able to observe over several different communities – as well as at protests and in literature. Whilst it, much like my first conclusion, might seem obvious – looking at the representation of the movement in the media, the focus is almost always on the practical “hack” style actions of individuals or groups attached to the movement. Though a full content analysis was not undertaken, a brief review of 294 documents pulled from journalistic articles

concerning Anonymous using the Lexis Nexis database showed that the group is typically linked to activities involving DDoS attacks, hacking servers, taking down websites, data theft and leakages of personal information. Very little mention is made of the great deal of awareness spreading, and collection and distribution of legally-ascertained information which I have observed as being an important part of Anonymous activity, not just on WhyWeProtest.

The discussion I had with WWP demonstrated to me that this representation, if it is meant to hold for all of those who identify as part of the movement, is misrepresentative of what most of the day-to-day actions of the varied communities involve – which is precisely the process of information sharing as described above.

All this information sharing is laced with an undertone of tongue-in-cheek humour or what might be called trolling – which many users referred to as “bringing the lulz”. “Lulz” is a bastardisation of the popular internet acronym “lol” meaning “laugh-out-loud”, but lulz itself is a term which was very much adopted by the Anonymous movement as a whole to represent a very particular, mocking tone of amusement at others expense typical in much of their activism.

For WhyWeProtest “Lulz” seem to represent a readiness to ridicule anything and so not to take anything too seriously (perhaps an extension of not being a “true believer” in anything, as suggested by participant N). Whilst trolling and the proliferation of memes and image macros is an internet-wide trend, for WWP Lulz seems to allow members to maintain a distance from the topic in hand and therefore an ability to more objectively assess it unburdened with any requirement to pay it undue respect. Participant W’s quote earlier in this

text, regarding the responsibilities of Anonymous members at WWP stated that it is the responsibility of anons to share information, news and ideas which are relevant to the project, and to “back up” any fellow members of the movement if required, they go on to state that:

“Other than that bringing the lulz seems to be a necessary lubricant as well 🤔”

Participant I states, on the rules for Anonymous and WhyWeProtest: “6. *The lulz. Bring dem.*”

And finally, this was reiterated to me in a one-on-one interview with another WhyWeProtest member, participant B:

“I choose also to comply with the over-riding mandate of "teh lulz"; if it ain't fun I'm doin' it wrong.”



**Figure 16 L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the church of scientology - his face photoshopped onto the body of a nazi officer
courtesy of WhyWeProtest**

On the forum “lulz” is usually expressed through mocking the church of scientology using image macros, photoshopped images and jokes. As an example, pinned to the very top of the

“*News and Current Events*” board are two very similar threads: “*L. Ron Hubbard PROJECT MASS SHOOP*” and “*David Miscavige PROJECT MASS SHOOP*” both threads are filled with a great many images of two prominent figures in the church of scientology: L. Ron Hubbard, its founder and David Miscavige, the current leader of the church. Each of the pictures of these two men has been doctored to splice their face into countless compromising, offensive, humorous and provocative images. These two threads were created in 2010 for the former, and 2008 for the latter, and to this day, almost a decade later, they remain pinned to the top of the forum – some of the first threads made in support of Chanology, and still likely the first few threads a user will see upon visiting the site in 2017.



Figure 17 David Miscavige (left) and L. Ron Hubbard (right) as Mini-me and Dr Evil from the Austin Powers franchise. Courtesy of lermanet via WhyWeProtest

For some members of WhyWeProtest, the act of engaging with their brand of activism must be fun by default, or else it is not worth it. Approaching their subject matter with a sense of humour allows the users at WhyWeProtest to engage with the various revelations they have discovered about the church of scientology. Participant W perhaps demonstrates this fact most succinctly; when asked whether “lulz” contributes anything to Anonymous activity, and whether they feel that those who argue against this irreverent approach (what many in the community colloquially call “*moralfags*”) are harming Anonymous by attempting to take the subject matter of their activism more seriously, participant W stated (emphasis added):

*“I count myself a moralfag albeit one with a black sense of humour, So I get a great deal of joy from anon humour. There remains a great mix of all types of anons and I personally wouldn't have it any other way. Plenty of hard work is done here and tedious tasks are undertaken, so the lulz are in a small way a perk that breaks the tedium and **sometimes inoculates against the distressing subjects that are sometimes tackled.**”*

This belief is supported by participant B (emphasis added):

*“The value of teh lulz mandate is manifold, as I see it. It serves as a recruiting tool in that people often gravitate towards groups who seem to be having fun. It helps to keep things in perspective and serves to dampen moral and leader faggotry. It is also a highly effective protest tool in that reducing a foe down to a laughing stock Disempowers that foe and serves to reduce the foe's own recruiting of support in that no one really wants to join a group or serve an idea which will result in them also becoming subject to mockery. Teh lulz is also an effective communication tool for reaching otherwise unconcerned publics. In the dissemination of ideas, **satire trumps analysis.**”*

It is this approach which led to my conclusion that their sense of humour around the subject of the church of scientology allows the users at WhyWeProtest to maintain an objectivity and distance from their target, and so the ability to assess and critique it more effectively without having to bother with paying it any respect.

It was obvious to me from my observations that WWP took a very different stance on hacktivism to some of the more perhaps illicit methods used by other groups which might also fall under the Anonymous umbrella – the forum moderators regularly emphasise this point to new members – they are a group with a very specific focus on Chanology and scientology and they hold a very specific view on what is and what is not acceptable activities in support of this cause (even though it is a decade old, Jordan and Taylor (2004) “Rebels with a Cause” is perhaps useful in understanding this ethos: they talk about “direct action” hacktivists and “politically correct” hacktivists as two ends of a spectrum – direct action hacktivists use disruptive methods to engage their targets, whereas politically correct hacktivists see these methods as counterproductive to information flow and instead emphasise information sharing and collection as a tool for enlightenment – WWP would fall very much on the politically correct hacktivist side). WWP users are encouraged to focus upon activities which promote awareness of the issues surrounding scientology and the church, they share news articles, discuss and arrange real life protests akin to those which occurred in 2008 outside scientology locations worldwide, and discourage new or inexperienced users from discussing illegal hacking tactics such as Distributed Denial of Service attacks.

On several occasions across my time interacting with WWP, the image in figure 18 was shared with me:

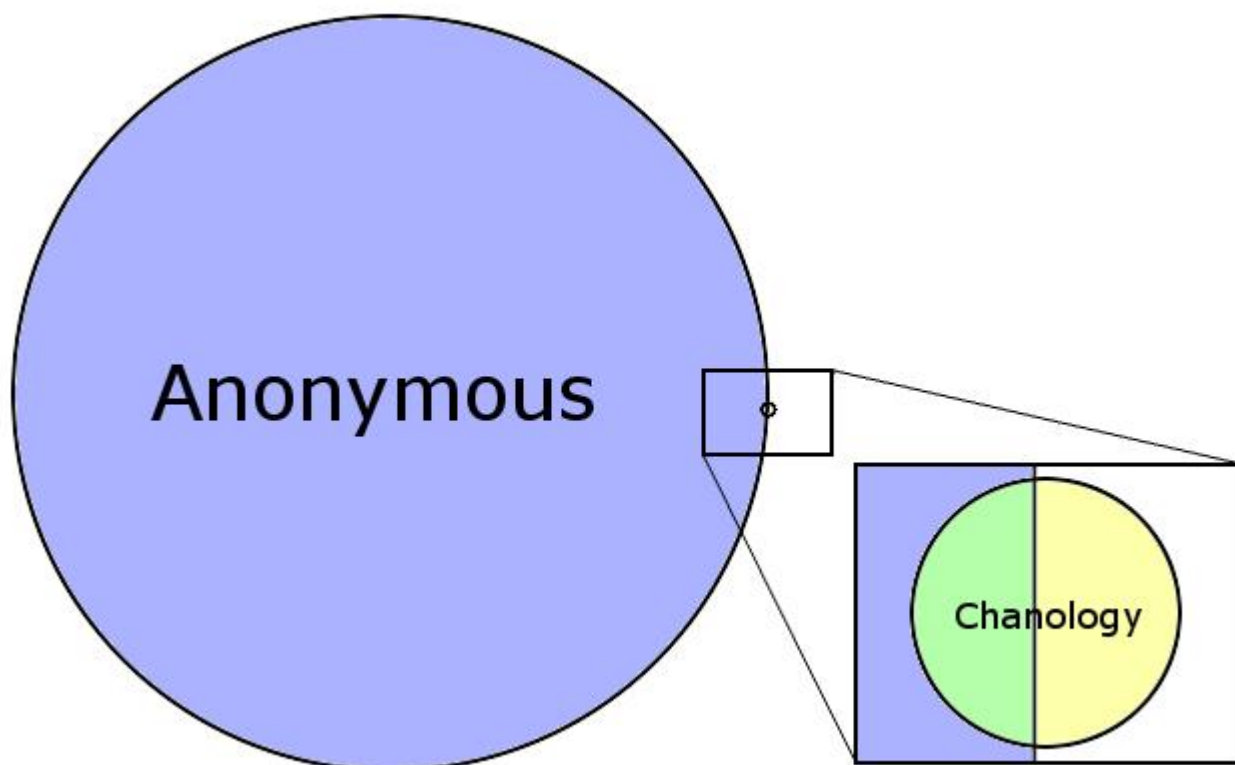


Figure 18 a representation of the space occupied by Chanology within the Anonymous movement courtesy of WhyWeProtest

Figure 18 seems to be the standard WWP response when faced with a question from an outsider regarding their position amongst the Anonymous community. Another user described WWP as “*a tiny zit on the arse of anonymous*”. Here, Anonymous is a large featureless entity – any part of it indistinguishable from any other, save for the small speck that is Chanology, which lies partly inside and partly outside Anonymous.

My interactions with WWP occurred primarily around February 2014, and though my observation and interaction with the community occurred for several months before, and stretched for a number of months after this date, the importance of this first group interaction

for the impact it would have on my project cannot be understated. I was beginning to reflect upon my approach to Anonymous, and as stated in chapter 4 “The Million Mask March” it was in November 2013 and having observed the great variance in protest form at the MMM that I began to question my original thoughts about Anonymous forming a cohesive collective identity. My interactions with WWP and, put in stark graphic form above, my realisation of the length and breadth of communities, groups and individuals which comprise the movement problematised this assertion further.

This may seem like a simple conclusion, but actually I think my own initial misunderstanding of this point is also somewhat reflective of a general misunderstanding of what Anonymous is in the wider public discourse – often Anonymous is portrayed as a single whole, just described as “the hacker group Anonymous” or if you are very lucky you might get “the hacktivist collective Anonymous” but rarely does the description dig much deeper than that, this is perhaps because the media lacks the correct language to describe a formation as fluid and ephemeral as Anonymous. They like structures which are rigid and fronted by recognisable faces and symbols, and perhaps that’s why the mask of Anonymous is such a troublesome topic for them and why communities such as WWP are just as likely to be lumped alongside other communities simply because of the connection.

On the smaller scale, this conclusion also has implications for my own project – my initial title was “*Can Hacktivism be Understood as the Performance of a Collective Digital Identity*” and I was increasingly reaching the conclusion that it absolutely cannot be understood as a collective identity. The feedback from WWP was critical in my reaching this conclusion, but it is also backed up by my own observations at protests and in other locations online.

I gathered a great deal of semantically rich, dense, heterogenous and ultimately useful data from the community at WhyWeProtest, and my initial approach and subsequent interaction both in public and private were agreed upon the proviso that I would return to the community later to share my conclusions with them. My first contact with the community occurred in December 2013, and in September 2014 I returned to the community with my conclusions, such as they were at the time. I was keen to emphasise to the community members that the conclusions drawn were a work in progress, and there might be further advancement and refinement of said conclusions as more data was collected from other communities around the web and in real life. Nonetheless, many of the WWP users who I interacted with ten months prior were still present to give their opinions on the conclusions that I drew, and largely they were welcomed and agreed with. From simple thanks such as participant M's simple:

"thanks for returning to share with us"

to participant R's:

"I think you hit it fairly well, particularly the bit of how the press (and possibly the English language) probably lack the necessary words to describe this quite new phenomenon. I'm sure there are authors that can chime in on that, Colman springs to mind.

I also like your take on the function of lulz. I think it is a very shrewd observation.

Good luck with you thesis!"

The few members of the community who responded to this update thread were receptive to my conclusions, and thankful for my returning to present them to them, and fulfilling my half of the bargain. I was keen to communicate my thanks to the community for their patience in communicating with me, but also maintain a working relationship with the group should I need to return for further interactions.

As I predicted to the users of WWP, those first few conclusions developed over time into those detailed above – but largely they followed the same loose structure: WhyWeProtest is another example of a community which breaks what I had originally assumed to be the norm for Anonymous activists, for the WWP, information is a social lubricant and is central to the ethos around which the community operates, and finally there is the importance of “trolling” as a method by which the community can maintain a distance from their subject and allow themselves the freedom to focus on the primacy of information as opposed to having to take the subject seriously.

6.2 AnonUK – What used to be and the Practical Side of Internet Activism

In contrast to WhyWeProtest, AnonUK was a forum formed around bringing together Anonymous members in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, the website has, since the end of my data collection period at that site, closed and disappeared entirely from the internet – as has the portal through which I discovered the forum “*anonstillalive.com*”: a list of Anonymous related websites set up in 2010 to keep a track of the ever-growing movement and other websites which worked alongside AnonUK such as “*downwiththe.org*” which focused on the Chanology activities of the UK contingent of Anonymous. In the methods section of this thesis I list three requirements a community must display for it to be considered a viable candidate for research in this study, briefly here:

1. It must have identifiable boundaries.
2. It must be active and have regular contributors.
3. It must be explicitly related to Anonymous.

At the time of writing, unfortunately, AnonUK has become one of the many now defunct Anonymous related websites I encountered whilst researching potential candidates for the interview stage of the study. Whilst this is not a problem with regards to the notes I took at the time, and the transcript I have for the interviews conducted – it does mean that I am unable to return to the forum to share my results as I did with WWP, and I am unable to follow up and collect further data to supplement the interviews conducted in 2014.

Regardless, the conclusions I could draw from the data collected at the time draws a picture of a community more interested in the practical than the theoretical side of hacktivism.

Much like WhyWeProtest, AnonUK site was set up as a traditional forum with boards and threads created by users. The site was far smaller than the many thousand strong-members of WWP, so conversation was comparably quieter, slower and more personal. Unlike my interactions with WWP, at AnonUK I engaged with a few members directly, but the method of approaching the community with a full thread was nowhere near as successful as it was in my previous attempts at WWP. I posted an initial approach thread, and received a single message in return – from a user suggesting I contact the forum administrator directly, as I was unlikely to get any bites on the thread. Thankfully, I was contacted via the in-site messaging service by a user who agreed to be privately interviewed – who was able and willing to provide some brief insight into the perspective he had on the nature of Anonymous with regards to his attendance at AnonUK.

I was building upon the interactions I had with WWP, and so had gathered a bank questions which I could pose to my participants upon commencing the interaction.

AnonUK was not a community particularly interested in debating, picking apart and re-sharing pieces of salient information, their reason for existing was to facilitate the practical running and attendance of UK-based protests, and my interview with participant P shows this. When asked whether they felt that there was an air of mystery surrounding Anonymous, and whether AnonUK was unique insofar as it facilitated actual contact between Anons, P replied:

“No. There’s nothing mysterious about Anonymous. Anyone can find out whatever they need to know, usually just be asking around or lurking.”

Indeed, this is an idea I had also encountered across the web when researching the various communities associated with Anonymous. I had expected to encounter much more resistance when it came to engage with the movement, but in fact I found that there were very little actual boundaries to participant and engagement, at least on the surface. P also felt that the mystery associated with Anonymous comes in part because of the lack of good media coverage of the group:

“The lack of analysis, balance, investigation, good information, fact checking, and understanding of Anonymous that we see in the MSM is reflected across the spectrum in its reporting of areas such as politics, economics, jurisprudence, and science. This is not necessarily a bad thing for Anonymous, especially over the long term.”

Communities such as AnonUK are not conducive to the image of an isolated loner in a basement, engaging only with causes they encounter online and, as Gladwell would suggest, using their detachment from the source material to disengage from the conflict if any risk becomes involved. The community at AnonUk was built to facilitate precisely the opposite - a demystification of the movement, a bringing together of Anons.

Unlike other communities I had spoken to, much of the conversations occurring on the AnonUK forum were related to the practicalities of attending various protests. My observation of the community came around the time leading up to the 2014 Million Mask March, and much of the interaction on threads on the forum was about who was and who was not going to attend the march. Some users offered to share lifts with other users, some were asking for a place to stay for the night or good places around Trafalgar Square to take refuge and get some food before and after the march.

Outside of this time, much of the interactions were concerned with local matters specific to the UK, with conversations regarding local and national politicians, international relations and the particulars of freedom of information with regards to the internet and UK law. The majority of information sharing posts, in contrast to WWP, had very little interaction other than the original post, and perhaps a comment or two in response. There was far more interaction with regards to the practical questions of who was attending which protests and where.

The interactions I had with AnonUK were brief in nature, but it highlighted an important point – that communities associated with Anonymous might not just be focused upon the theoretical and analytical side of modern hacktivism, they also might go some way to facilitate the social interaction of these otherwise disparate individuals.

6.3 #AnonOps IRC channel, Transient Communities and Voltaic Conversation

Gabriella Coleman, in her work concerning Anonymous between the years of 2008 and 2010, focuses heavily upon the action occurring on the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels which became the vibrant hubs of social interaction surrounding Anonymous at that time. These were the early days after the “political birth” of Anonymous when Project Chanology, the Anonymous operation around which WhyWeProtest was created, was in its earliest stages. In particular, Coleman focused on the channel named “#AnonOps” which served as the main channel from which most of the Anonymous operations originated and Coleman discusses how off-shoot channels would regularly form, collapse and form again within the space of a few minutes to facilitate smaller working groups, and new arms of whatever nascent Anonymous Operations were running at the time. It is because of its importance to the Anonymous community in its nascent years that I originally started to observe the interactions at this site.

In comparison to the two previously discussed communities, the IRC channel for #AnonOps was relatively more technically complicated to access. That is not to say that it was a private channel, as I was able to gain access without having to receive approval from any existing infrastructure, rather, the process for learning the location of the channel, finding an appropriate program or web application through which to view it, and then learning the chat commands required to operate IRC’s various functions was somewhat more complicated than the simple forum interaction required to access WhyWeProtest and AnonUK.

The AnonOps IRC channel has an in-built transience to its community. Unlike the static accounts and usernames found on traditional forums, on AnonOps it is up to the user to “claim” their username each time they log into the system, and not doing so will revert their username to simply “guest[number]” after a set period of time. The very first time that a new

user logs into the channel, and wishes to claim a username for themselves they must request the privilege from the system admins, this is a simple task of inputting a series of commands into the chat box (preferably on the landing page, as opposed to the channel itself where any mistypes would be broadcast to the community) requesting the username and providing an email address. The guidance for new users, written by the administrators at AnonOps explicitly suggests that, at this point, the user inputs an intentionally fake email address. As an outsider first approaching the community, with this suggestion AnonOps was already beginning to communicate the kind of community I would find beyond. Where the users at WhyWeProtest suggest caution when interacting online, and will gladly mock a newcomer who does not use appropriate tools to mask their activity online, AnonOps takes this a step further as anonymity is built into the very framework of the system.

My observations on AnonOps occurred across several months, and mostly consisted of remaining in close contact with the text chat from which it is comprised – but not overtly contributing. Some days the channel was alive with activity, people sharing information back and forth, arguing about politics, international relations and video games. On these days, it is easy to imagine the frantic chaos of the early days of the Anonymous movement where there were supposedly hundreds, even thousands of users passing through the system on any one day.

Other times the channel is oddly quiet, dedicated users only contributing every few minutes to a string of loosely connected messages, jokes, memes, links and quiet playful jibes. On these slower days, it was far easier to pick out those who had made this place a site of social interaction, rather than just the practical activity of organising a world-wide hacktivism movement.

There was always new people coming into the fold, with new usernames cropping up daily.

Some would return for further interactions, others would not. Presumably, some of the users were repeat visitors under different pseudonyms, it is often difficult to tell. Unlike WhyWeProtest, where a system for welcoming new members is built into the forum – on AnonOps it is a single click on the webchat service provided on their homepage, and the new user is into the fray of the chat window. There is a list of rules if the new user should seek it out, and it is linked at the top of the chat window whenever they log into the system, but otherwise they are free to interact just as any other user might.

Conversation typically revolves around several key issues: politics, the latest news and internet memes. The language is brash and often uncompromisingly offensive. Conversation moves at a breakneck pace when the room is busy, with several conversations occurring at the same time and people moving in and out of the “room” with regularity (one of the bugbears of the community is when a user logs in and out of the room in quick succession – spamming the chat log with notifications of their entrances/exits). Just as at WWP, a lot of the interaction is sharing links to interesting or salient articles – but unlike WhyWeProtest, because the chat box moves at a great speed there is not as much focus on the quality of that information. The message will likely be way off the screen within a minute, so there is no lasting record of who or when someone posted any individual piece of information, and because the AnonOps chat room consists of a single string of messages one after another, there is no permanency to any individual message posted to the group – particularly if the conversation is moving quickly – unlike more permanent forum-style boards such as WhyWeProtest and formerly AnonUK where once a link is posted as a thread, unless it is specifically deleted, then it can be visited for the length of time it exists on the website. It is for this reason that the AnonOps feels much more like a fast-moving text conversation, rather than a debate chamber or editing room feeling felt from WWP. AnonOps is chaotic, exciting

and at times frantic – but it is the immediacy of the format which facilitates the fast action and transfer of ideas. It is clear which this was a powerful tool in the height of the Anonymous activity in 2008-2010.

In contrast to that early period, however, much of the conversation on a day-to-day basis on AnonOps now consists of casual conversation, the sharing of links to amusing videos, images and music. There are still links to news articles shared, but during my time observing the chat room I saw only very small snippets of organisational action with regards to hacking activity. That is not to say that it was not a topic of conversation, a great deal of attention was paid to various events around the internet, one group hacking another's server, who perpetrated which hack on whom and what might be the repercussions. In contrast to WhyWeProtest, there was an acceptance on AnonOps IRC that users would come here seeking information about how to contribute to potentially illegal activity, and indeed there may have been such activity occurring in other, privately held chat channels. Take, for example the following interaction observed on the main IRC channel one morning in January 2015:

"F: need to crack a .ppt with some high-entropy password. used online serverpark password-online.com but didn't work. paying €20. evidence of success required.

S: lol BOFH

L: wrong place. Go beg someone to do your dirty work elsewhere"

The frequently asked questions area of the website addresses this kind of activity up front:

“OMG ima l33t h4x0r! Um, can you show me how?”

*Yeah, sure you are. This question is asked so often, it deserves mention here. While we may not agree with everything and everyone, we will fight for your right to talk about it all you want. A number of channels have this as a topic. Try our automated **#tutorials** channel in IRC for a starting point and go from there. Lurking is a good, too. Type /list and check out the different channels.”*

One user lamented the wastage of some Operations they had spearheaded, which had now fallen fallow:

“B: all of my ops died. It feels like if I’m not in the op, then it just dies.

T: lol

B: like no one is working on it anymore

T: that happens

B: not even my crew is on anymore

B: it’s like, wtf???”

Here, B has been the organiser for several operations which have fallen to the wayside when they had to take time away from the community. But just as quickly the conversation will move from Operations to current affairs:

“B: it’s like, wtf???”

T: "Second Alps Flight recorder found"

B: what is this?

B: A flight went down?

T: Germanwings disaster

T: 4 days ago

B: is it the one that the co-pilot committed suicide?

T: maybe more

T: yes

B: When I used to fly the joke was always, it might not be my time to die, but it might be the pilots.

B: in this case, that joke is correct."

Here we can see how quickly the conversation can move from a discussion concerning the operation of the activist side of the movement, to current affairs and then bringing the tone back down to the "lulz" so associated with Anonymous through a smear of black humour. The interaction between T and B here is typical of the kind of voltaic conversation style on AnonOPs – perpetually jumping from topic to topic, like switching channels on a television. Sometimes I would log on to find them immersed in a political debate about the state of the middle east, but then just as quickly that would degrade to laughter when someone posts a link to an amusing image macro.

Just like WhyWeProtest, the AnonOps IRC channel specifically identifies with the Anonymous movement, they use many of the same language idioms, they share information with each other and debate the general worth of that information, but fundamentally the community who frequent AnonOps differ greatly from that which attend WhyWeProtest in the following ways:

WWP specifically forbids the discussion or sharing of guides or guidance on how to engage in illegal activity. New users are warned against such activity, and told to seek that kind of information elsewhere. On AnonOps, this kind of information is shared far more frequently, and discussed in a more open and accepting manner. There are explicit channels within the IRC that support the discussion to this effect, though typically it seems to be kept out of the main AnonOps channel itself.

The fast-moving chat-room of the IRC gives the community a transient feeling, with certain identifiable regular visitors engaging closely with the community on a regular basis, but new members and guests dropping in and out all the time. Additionally, in comparison to the board and thread format of the traditional internet forums at WWP and AnonUK, the IRC channel is a chat-room which at times moves at a breakneck pace – so with every new line of conversation, another one drops off (or rather, cycles up off) the screen. Additionally, the administrators at IRC explicitly state that they keep no logs that could identify a user, and that the chat logs that are produced go through a rigorous destruction process:

“The method used to destroy logs that cannot be immediately sent to /dev/null is a secure shred; log data is overwritten with random data then 0's. Good luck recovering that.”

These two features: the acceptance of more illicit activity and the fast-paced transient nature of the community feed into each other, as there is no record of any conversation on the chat channels so users feel freer to communicate about sensitive subjects.

WhyWeProtest, AnonUK and the AnonOps IRC channel are three very different communities, the way they choose to approach the activism of Anonymous is so very different that they might ordinarily be considered part of three different movements altogether, but just like the many varied protesters, campaigners and activists at the Million Mask March – if we are to believe the rhetoric of participation as the only requirement for membership of Anonymous, then we are obliged to consider them each to be part of the same entity. So – that being the case, how can we best understand such an entity? If different elements of this entity each work so drastically differently, then where are the points at which we might connect them together, and what does that say about the Anonymous phenomenon?

The next chapter is concerned with these questions, drawing from the previous three results chapters I hope to present the argument that the sum of my conclusions is that Anonymous cannot be understood to have a single cohesive identity, but rather a collection of such identities which form a social movement.

7.0 Discussion

This thesis is the story of the project from its earliest stages: wrangling with ethical questions of consent, risk and anonymity, practical questions of method and methodology, through the challenges of data collection in a controversial community and ultimately analysis, conclusions and write up. As such, the chapters reflect an evolution of the project itself; beginning as it did with the question: Can Hacktivism be Understood as the Performance of a Collective Digital Identity?

It became clear, quickly, that Anonymous was a far more complex and multifaceted entity than one that could be encompassed by a single, cohesive identity – the first time this became apparent was my evening in the cold November air in 2013, there was such an array of protest imagery, so many different causes all being championed under the banner of Anonymous. I understood collective identity to be built upon solidarity, shared norms, beliefs, values and practices and whilst I observed a great deal of similarity between all those masked people on the streets of London, I saw just as many differences. Different causes, different methods, different practices and beliefs – and yet all claiming to be part of the controversial hacktivist group, Anonymous. Each individual actor masked, standing alongside each other against the police and parliament.

Observations from one evening in London are not enough to pass a judgement on my growing doubt about collective identity as a useful tool to understand Anonymous, but observing the many varied communities across the internet: social media feeds, Facebook, Twitter, subreddits, forums, chat rooms and the IRC channels – each community or media feed with its own values, its own beliefs about what the movement should be, how it should operate and their own opinions on the other groups as either “*morfags*” who disdain the hard-line and illicit actions which need to be taken to further the cause, “*egofags*” front and centre in

YouTube videos claiming to speak for Anonymous, “*Script kiddies*” running low-orbit ion cannons out of their basements, pretending to be real hackers and so on. There was little to no consensus, each of the communities from which I drew these opinions count themselves as part of Anonymous, but there was rarely a day when I would not encounter something unique about the particular community with which I was interacting.

My observations at the various communities which lead me to understand a part of the length and breadth of Anonymous, and the subsequent interviews I carried out with a few of the self-identifying members of the movement, cemented this concept for me. Based upon these observations I concluded that collective identity would simply not suffice to explain this dynamic, flexible and chaotic social formation. I broadened the net from which I was drawing my conclusions, looking for a wider and more appropriate moniker I might place upon Anonymous, and my reading brought me to the literature concerning Social Movements.

I detailed in my literature review the various definitions of social movements: collective behaviour from Turner and Killian (1987), resource mobilization theory from Zald and McCarthy (1977), political process from Charles Tilly (1984) and finally New Social Movement theory from Touraine (1981) and Alberto Melucci (1985/1989). Mario Diani (1992) identified in Social Movement literature the same brevity of description as I had identified in literature concerning Anonymous – often would literature skip the substantive question of definition as there was no agreed upon definition. The definition of Social Movements was as elusive as the classification of Anonymous, and so it was easier to discard the “*what*” and skip straight to the “*why*” or the “*who, when or how?*”. I saw elements of the data I was drawing from my observations and interviews which began to fit into the definition provided by Diani’s “*proposal for synthesis*”, and I began to see areas also where the definition would not fit. This next chapter will discuss the features of the data I have collected which support the claim that we might most appropriately understand Anonymous as a social

movement, and in the chapter that follows I will suggest several ways in which the concept might be updated to encompass a social phenomenon as fittingly elusive as Anonymous.

As shown in the literature review: definitions of Social Movements differ greatly, but the definition given in his “*proposal for synthesis*” by Mario Diani perhaps gives us the best guide to understanding how we might attribute elements of Anonymous to social movement theory. To reiterate, Diani’s definition of social movements is built upon a synthesis of the four main theories of social movements since the 1960s: Resource mobilisation theory, Political Process Theory, Collective Behaviour Theory and New Social Movement theory. He argues that though each of these theories might appear at first to be at odds with each other, there are, in fact, elements where we might be able to connect the theories together, and so create a definition which synthesises and combines the most enduring and strongest parts of each.

His definition:

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”

has four main components:

1. Networks of Informal Interaction
2. Shared Beliefs and Solidarity
3. Collective Action on Conflictual Issues
4. Action which primarily occurs outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life

This discussion will address each of these in turn, briefly re-emphasise their definition and then suggest ways in which the data collected as a part of this study falls in line with this definition of social movements, and the ways in which it does not.

7.1 Networks of Informal interaction

Touraine (1981), as part of his definition of “New Social Movements” discusses social movements as comprised of actors, organisations and groups, whereas McCarthy and Zald (1977:1223) focus more upon a “set of opinions and beliefs” which are transformed into action through their interaction with specific movement organisations, constituents, adherents and “bystander publics”. Though later work on “micro mobilisation contexts” (*“any small group setting in which processes of collective attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organization to produce mobilization for collective action”* (McAdam et al., 1988:709)) and “social movement sectors” (whereby social movement organisations do not exist as isolated actors, rather they interact with other organisations, even if this coordination is not formalised (Zald and McCarthy, 1977: 1220)) bring the resource mobilization theory much closer to Melucci’s New Social Movements perspective insofar as they focus upon a plurality of actors involved in social movements and the informality of the linkages between those actors. Diani’s synthesised definition incorporates these elements:

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations”

(Diani, 1992:8)

With regards to the Anonymous movement, Gabriella Coleman (2014) describes the network of individuals and groups which comprise Anonymous as being “nodal” with clusters of groups and individuals loosely linked to others. These links take the form of cultural, geographical or social connections. Take, for example, the relationship between 4chan and the rest of the Anonymous communities I studied where there is a cultural linkage, or WhyWeProtest and AnonUK where the linkage is cultural insofar as they share a similar use of language, and some practices with regards to arranging real life protests. Each of these communities is distinct from the other, but loosely connected via their attribution of the Anonymous moniker.

These communities are not tied by strong bonds, akin to a company or a team, they have not entered into any kind of official partnership or business deal – and they can certainly be considered separate entities as they populate different areas of the web, have different beliefs (as will be covered in the following section) and appear to be comprised of entirely separate populations. Though, it is important to note that with all the communities I observed the anonymity afforded by their individual user accounts is a pseudonymity as unless the user utilises the “guest” or “anonymous” contribution features of each website, then they at least identify with a username which persists between visits. It is also important to note that as they are hidden behind this veil of pseudonymity, it is not possible to know to what extent any two communities overlap, as a user might use one username at one location, and another elsewhere. Gary T. Marx (1999) defines seven broad types of identity knowledge: 1) legal name. 2) locatability. 3) pseudonyms that can be linked to legal name and/or locatability. 4) pseudonyms that cannot be linked to other forms of identity knowledge. 5) pattern knowledge. 6) social categorisation. 7) symbols of eligibility/non-eligibility (ibid, 1999:100). In this case, we might consider most users at our research sites to be operating under: “4) *pseudonyms that cannot be linked to other forms of identity knowledge*” (ibid, 1999:100). Marx expands on the idea:

“Identification may involve symbols, names, or pseudonyms that cannot in the normal course of events be linked back to a person or an address by intermediaries. This may be because of a protective policy against collecting the information”

(ibid, 1999:101)

Published in 1999, in *“Whats in a Name? Some Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity”* Marx links this form of identity knowledge with the idea of espionage and criminal activity, as opposed to standard internet practice:

“For example, in some states those tested for AIDS are given a number and receive results by calling in their number without ever giving their name or address. Or it may be because a duped audience does not know that the person they are dealing with is using fraudulent identification for example spies, undercover operatives, and con artists.

As far as my data would suggest, most of my participants were not spies. This was, nonetheless, the dominant form of identity knowledge present amongst the communities: a pseudonymity which could not ordinarily be linked back to a person or an address.

We can see the networks of informal interaction at work at the Million Mask March: each of the individuals and protest groups who attend the event are connected by their adherence, at least in name and appearance, to the Anonymous movement – wearing the masks, chanting the slogans and standing alongside other people who do the same, but there are no formal connections between them.

The event itself is explicitly conducted outside of the formality of official protest legislature insofar as it is an unlicensed event. This informality can be seen in the statements by the police on the evening of the event: *“We have a duty to uphold the law! This is an unlicensed event!”* Which, in 2014, blared out the loudspeaker across the crowds, and the ticker message which was projected onto the National Gallery in 2015 which conveyed very much the same message. I believe the unlicensed nature of the protest is an expression of the informality of the linkages between the actors and organisations in attendance. The Million Mask March could never be formal or licensed because, according to the central tenet of anti-hierarchy and anti-leadership, there should not be anyone in a position to organise the protest ahead of time with authorities. So, the informality of linkages between actors and organisations is clear to see – the exception to this fact may well be the 2015 protest where the police issued specific demands to the attendees of the march, including a start and end time – though this may, in part, have contributed to the increase in tension between protesters and the police at this march.

The other element of Diani’s definition is the plurality of actors involved with social movements. There is a high degree of variability amongst the various entities which interact through the Anonymous social movement; from the larger organisations which engage with a great deal of information sharing and awareness spreading such as WhyWeProtest and the more popular twitter feeds such as @YourAnonNews and @AnonymousKY – which boast followers in the many hundreds of thousands, to the smaller groups made from highly technically proficient individuals such as those black-hat hackers who comprised the Anonymous off-shoot Lulzsec. At the same time, individual actors within the movement are expected to stand on their own – and whilst the movement provides its own safety in numbers, its egalitarianism with regards to expectations of authenticity and verifiability of information sources encourages users to at once think of themselves as on an equal footing with their fellow members, but also beholden to the same level of scrutiny – this is particularly apparent at WhyWeProtest. So, we

might understand Anonymous to be comprised of a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations – in line with Diani’s definition of social movements.

7.2 Shared Beliefs and Solidarity

Diani states that one of the uniting elements of the four social movement theories he identified is a focus on social movements being typified by their shared beliefs and a solidarity between the individual actors, groups and organisations which comprise them. Out of the four pillars of Diani’s synthesised definition of social movements, this is perhaps the one with which Anonymous has the most trouble aligning. I have already detailed how I began my work looking at Anonymous with an idea to identify a collective identity, (which Diani argues is synonymous with solidarity as you cannot have one without the other) but I found that the data I was collecting, in its heterogeneity, questioned this definition. I will detail here the ways in which my data shows that Anonymous communities align themselves with this idea, and where they do not.

First, Diani’s definition brings together Zald and McCarthy’s emphasis on a social movement’s “*set of shared opinions and beliefs*”, Alberto Melucci’s identification of the requirement for “*solidarity*” and Touraine, Melucci and Tilly’s emphasis on the importance of “*identity*”.

“The boundaries of a social movement network are defined by the specific collective identity shared by the actors involved in the interaction”

(Diani, 1992:9)

My data has shown that even between the various communities I spoke to, there are identifiable norms, values, beliefs and opinions which unite them. There are, however, perhaps as many which divide them – and this is where the complication arises, each community I spoke to identifies as part of Anonymous, they each have a kinship with the hacker culture around which Anonymous is built, but can we consider Anonymous to be a social movement by Diani’s definition if there are numerous ways in which the communities do not align?

It would be convenient to argue that the groups which do not adhere to a certain core-set of principles are *not* part of the Anonymous social movement – leaving us with a cohesive and unified set of actors, groups and organisations which we could label “Anonymous”. By the group’s own definition, however, regardless of the presentation of the community, if it claims to be part of Anonymous then we must consider it so – remember the couple on the streets of London:

“Well, they’re here, aren’t they? ... You’re here too, that means you’re part of it as well”.

My data has shown that, typically, the various Anonymous communities agree upon the importance of the lack of hierarchy, and the leaderlessness and ephemerality of the movement. Take, for example, the various derogatory terms used to apply to individuals who attempt to single themselves out (“egofags”) or hold themselves above other members of the movement (“leaderfags” or “celebfags”). I observed no significant examples of individuals who held themselves above others, and whilst there were certainly strong personalities at every community I encountered, there were no objective leaders, no-one directing the group or taking charge. Participant N at WhyWeProtest stated a reason for this culture:

“Leaderfags are distrusted because they become authorities and eventually ideologues. And ideology negates Anonymous.”

Take the example of participant R’s comment on the importance of the freedom of information at WhyWeProtest:

“The culture here is to question all and blindly follow no one, thus encouraging faith in one’s own judgement while briskly questioning it for validity, thus elevating everyone. Well, elevating ME, anyway. I appreciate the idea of stripping the ideas-- data-- away from the aura of the presenter and evaluating it solely on its merits. Anonymous (sic) is absolute egalitarianism found nowhere else.”

Here, R emphasises the ability of knowledge to empower individuals to make informed decisions, they acknowledge that within Anonymous, not only are you expected to fend for yourself, but equally you are not expected to follow anyone, no one is above anyone else, and so everyone is subject to the same expectations – I too found this to be the truth, and entering the communities as an outsider I was subject to the same conditions.

WhyWeProtest’s focus upon an individual’s ability to interpret information and verify their sources is an example of how they will always question the validity of information, regardless of the source. And in their scepticism, they are united; no one member can claim ultimate authenticity, no leader has final say or guides the community through activities. This is an ethos which was pervasive across the various communities I spoke to, on the AnonOps IRC channel a popular response when an individual user attempted to rally the channel to their own cause

would be “*Anonymous is not your personal army*” meaning that they rejected individual causes in favour of larger targets.

Chris Landers, a writer for the Baltimore Sun, who interviewed a group of self-identifying members of Anonymous in 2008, shortly after their emergence into the world as an activist group, described them thus:

“Anonymous is a group, in the sense that a flock of birds is a group. How do you know they’re a group? Because they’re travelling in the same direction. At any given moment, more birds could join, leave, peel off in another direction entirely.”

(Landers, 2008)

The imagery of Anonymous as a flock of birds is useful, though I think Landers’ definition could go further: like a flock of birds, it is almost impossible to pick out an individual from the swirling crowd as they dive and weave. They appear, from the outside, to move as a single cohesive unit: changing direction at will and almost seemingly without direction. A flock of birds does not change direction because they are simply following a leader, or a neighbour, rather they anticipate sudden changes in the flock’s direction and act accordingly. Finally, just like a flock of birds, the sudden changes of direction protect each individual bird from attention from predators.

In terms of unified practices, whilst often the communities would not agree on the appropriateness of one protest activity over another, there were other ways in which you might consider them unified in practice. Across every community, even the more practical AnonUK, there was an emphasis on the importance of the irreverent sense of humour defined by some as “*trolling*” and others as “*the lulz*”. The IRC chat channel dedicated as much time to mocking and tearing down their targets as they did to sharing news and new tactics, bringing their

opponents down to a level at which they could belittle them. WhyWeProtest dedicate great swathes of their forum to images of photoshopped scientology personalities, and memes mocking the ineptitude and backwards nature of the church of scientology. Many of the protest placards, boards, images and chants at the Million Mask March were of the same vein; mocking political figures, people in positions of power or simply using jokes to convey a serious message. Whitney Phillips (2012), discussed the “troll” activities of Anonymous, and concluded that they operate at the level of spectacle, in an attempt to “hijack” or “reroute” cultural objects, turning their message in on themselves in order to highlight their own absurdities – we can see this process in the usage of imagery released by the church of scientology photoshopped into humorous situations by the users at WhyWeProtest, or the defacing of images of former British Prime Minister David Cameron on the placards of the protesters at the Million Mask March. This process of hijacking cultural images to mock them, and so highlight the absurdity in the object itself appears to be a process which is shared across the movement.

Each community I observed used a similar language of the colloquial internet and nerd-culture lexicon, referring to others around them as “fags” – usually with a prefix to denote whichever type of user they might be: a “*leaderfag*”, “*egofag*”, “*socialfag*”, “*newfag*” and so on. Each community employed the use of popular internet memes as a form of communication and “lulzy” humour and, of course, they all employed the Anonymous imagery of the white V mask.

They all espoused anonymity as a central core component of their corner of the movement, as a lynchpin which allows their particular brand of Anonymous activism to operate and aligned themselves with the central idea that the movement is given power through its anonymity. Anonymity was handled differently in each community, certainly, for AnonUK the veil of anonymity was perhaps the lightest, as community members would arrange times to meet and

travel together to protests, clearly having revealed their personal identities to each other. For WhyWeProtest anonymity was vital, but they had importantly just removed the option to post to their site using a guest or anonymous account, a feature which still existed on both the AnonOps IRC and AnonUK. Nevertheless, anonymity was still an important element for the users of WWP, and they emphasised the numerous ways in which it allows them to further their cause:

Participant R from WWP:

“1. Respect the efforts of others to remain anonymous. And respect them, PERIOD, for what they have to bring to this movement, no matter how great or small their contribution. Even if it's just unintentional lulz.

2. Anonymous is teaching me to be more clear about what part is verifiable fact versus speculation.

3. Don't get too butthurt. Period. Ever.

4. Bring on the lulz. And kittehs. And omg OTTERS.”

AnonOps was perhaps the site which most embraced and encouraged anonymity amongst its users, for example: they suggested using a false email address when signing up to the channel. Unlike the traditional forum formats of the other sites, AnonOps disposed of the chat logs and no information was retained which might identify the users on their site.

So, I observed a great deal of shared beliefs between individual actors, organisations and groups which might appear to be, at first glance, very different. I also saw a great deal of solidarity between those individuals, this was in evidence at the Million Mask March in perhaps its most striking form. A primarily online entity such as Anonymous might not be the most likely candidate for one of the largest street protests in the capital, but on those three November evenings on Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Parliament Square I saw a great deal of solidarity

between seemingly disparate protest groups, brought together under the Anonymous banner – often literally. At the front of the crowd walked a line of protesters, flanked by police and their speed controlled by a bank of riot vans which limited their advance down the wide Whitehall street to Parliament, at the brow of their moving mass was a long banner stretching from one side of the street to the other, displaying the prominent Anonymous slogan:

“We are Anonymous

We are Legion

We Do Not Forgive

We Do Not Forget

Expect us”



Figure 19 A protester at the Million Mask March displays her sign (picture credit to myself)

The protesters at the Million Mask March, as I discussed in both the chapter on the march itself and on Masks and Anonymity, are united in their absence of identity, everyone is masked in the same smirking, sly grin and they all join in the chant “*Whose streets?*” and the reply: “*OUR STREETS!*”. These rallying cries recalled images of the Mai 68 student protests in France: a period of civil unrest during May 1968 punctuated by strikes, demonstrations and the occupation of universities and factories across the country – protesting capitalism, American imperialism and consumerism. The call of “*Whose streets? OUR STREETS!*” from the protesters at the Million Mask March draws parallels with the tearing-up of the cobblestone streets of protesters in Paris and other cities across the country, revealing the sand foundation underneath, leading to the phrase “*Sous les pavés, la plage*” (“Under the cobblestones, the beach”). These cobblestones were often then used as missiles to be thrown at the police – the student protesters in France literally took back the street, held it in their hands and used it to express their ire, and whilst this kind of practice was not in evidence at the Million Mask March – there is certainly a historical resonance to the attempted reclamation of the streets of London by Anonymous.



Figure 20 "La Beaute Est Dans Larue" (The Beauty is in the Street) by the Atelier Populaire 1968

Online, the London march is conducted in solidarity with the 450-plus other locations across the globe, in Manchester, Barcelona, Paris, Stockholm, Washington, California and Sydney etc. Twitter feeds display these geographically dispersed pockets of Anonymous resistance “*checking in*” to show their support, and contribute to the worldwide display of power in numbers. In person, there are numerous boundary defining elements of protest attire, behaviour and demeanour which separate the Anonymous protester from the public, and from the police – including, but not limited to, wearing masks/scarves around the face/balaclavas, carrying placards and banners, antagonistic or dismissive behaviour towards police and the public, physically following the march along its route, travelling in groups of similarly attired individuals. Through these boundary-defining activities, the protesters build a solidarity amongst their hastily assembled and otherwise completely anonymised and unknown companions.

The above are all ways in which we might consider Anonymous to conform to Diani’s (1992) definition of the social movement, displaying, as the various organisations involved do, a shared system of practices, beliefs and values which suggest that there is solidarity and so a shared collective identity between the various organisations. As I have previously stated, however, there are as many areas in which the Anonymous communities do not align with one another. Diani (1992) acknowledges that just because his definition calls for solidarity within a movement, does not mean that there will be universal agreement between individuals and organisations within a movement and there may be conflict between these different parties, a constant process of “*realignment*” (Snow et al, 1986) and “*negotiation*” (Melucci, 1989) must occur between actors.

So, it does not necessarily mean that because there is not universal agreement on beliefs, practices and values between the various organisations which claim to be part of Anonymous, that Anonymous cannot, under this definition, be called a social movement. It does, however,

mean we must consider the nature of these disagreements, and then consider where the various “realignment” or “negotiation” processes are occurring.

There are clear differences between the organisations with regards to how they approach illegal activities in pursuit of the cause. The administrators for WWP warn new users against broaching the subject in the community. WhyWeProtest, as a rule, focus mostly upon facilitating the free flow of information about the church of scientology, organising and attending real world protests outside scientology locations and engaging in awareness spreading activity. In contrast, the users at AnonOps do not reject discussion on the subject out of hand, and though they will typically chastise any user who approaches the community with a spurious request for assistance on some hack or another, they will attempt to direct the user elsewhere to somewhere more appropriate for those kinds of conversations. Consider the interaction between users F, S and L:

“F: need to crack a .ppt with some high-entropy password. used online serverpark password-online.com but didn’t work. paying €20. evidence of success required.

S: lol BOFH

L: wrong place. Go beg someone to do your dirty work elsewhere”

Despite this response, the IRC channels do facilitate more technical hacking activity through the various channels which are set up in support of this, and in these channels users can find advice about how to download and run their own programs to assist in Anonymous operations – in this way the AnonOps community stands in stark contrast to the WWP community in terms of their beliefs about appropriate practice.

The protesters at the Million Mask March, though they would eventually come together to form a moving mass down Whitehall, begin the event fighting their own particular corner of the Anonymous movement. Anti-fracking, anti-austerity, anti-government, anti-media, anti-badger culling – each of these pockets of individual protest issues shoulder their own brand of protest practice, they have their own slogans and chants, they hold their own specific placards which, if you were to look a mere few feet to the left, might be incongruent with another protest group standing but a few feet away. These inconsistencies make the Million Mask March feel like a scatter-gun shot, rather than a sharp and pointed rapier-thrust of a protest – the political weight of the protest cannot be carried by the foundation of the issues upon which it is built, because they are so varied and widely spread. Compared to single-issue movement such as feminism, environmental movements, anti-nuclear and gay rights to name a few (Olafsson, 1988). Instead, the power of the Million Mask March comes from the leverage of the great many people willing, at least, to lend their “name” to the Anonymous cause. It is a protest with no further message than to show how many people they can convince to brave the British November weather to express their own brand of resistance. The march at once stands for a potent demonstration of the fractured and very much disunited nature of the Anonymous movement in its disarray and chaotic foundation, and perhaps just as potent, a commanding display of power in numbers.

Diani (1992) draws parallels between the idea of solidarity between individuals in a movement, and the idea of having a “collective identity”. This was clearly my focus very early in the study, but as I collected data I started seeing significant cleavages between actors (and communities) which problematised the idea of a single cohesive collective identity. Diani acknowledges such a difficulty – arguing that just because the movement has internal solidarity, does not mean there will always be consensus within the movement. This is perhaps the element of social

movement theory which fits least tightly with the observation data I collected from Anonymous – there are such varying expressions of so many protest issues that I began to question whether they could even be understood to be part of the same movement. And yet when questioned as to whether each disparate element considered themselves to be part of Anonymous, they each agreed they did, and indeed the enduring definition which held across the various communities I spoke to all agreed that the only requirement for being part of the movement is that you act, however small, to enhance the cause – whatever that might be. Anonymous has been named, in innumerable different places, anti-globalisation, anti-capitalist, anarchist, anti-government, anti-austerity, pro-freedom of speech and a cyber-crime collective – the definitions are as varied and as disparate as the group identity appears to be. Perhaps none of them are right, perhaps ever more likely is that they are all right, and each definition at least holds for a small part of the movement. There is, however, a definable **solidarity** between members of the movement, you can see this is at the Million Mask March as, following the fragmented, chaotic and many-issued clusters at Trafalgar Square as they begin to march towards Whitehall, Downing Street and Parliament their cries change from anti-badger culling, anti-fracking and “*free Assange!*” war cries, to a single, booming call of “*whose streets? OUR STREETS!*” each member masked, defiant and standing together. That is a group solidified, not in conflict.

7.3 Collective Action on Conflictual Issues

Conflict with an identifiable opponent is an important feature of a social movement. Diani points towards Touraine (1981), Melucci (1985/1989) and Tilly (1985) putting particular emphasis on conflict as a core component and whilst Turner and Killian (1987), and Zald and McCarthy (1977) are more comfortable with social change fulfilling this role, they acknowledge that social change processes often lead to eventual conflictual relationships with

other actors, groups and organisations. They differ, however, on their ideas of what should constitute the kind of conflict with which social movements engage – Touraine arguing that social movements focus upon “*historicity*” which is “*the overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society*” (Touraine, 1981:81). Whereas Melucci (1989) argues that social movements typify actions which challenge processes of systemic domination – both writers agree, however, that social movements are a small component of a broader definition of the term “*movements*”. Melucci, Turner and Killian focus on conflict which leads to cultural or personal change, whereas Tilly, McCarthy and Zald focus on actors in the political sphere. We might question whether these differences are indeed real, as these are differences of emphasis as opposed to actual substantive incompatible notions of what it is to be a social movement (Diani, 1992).

“Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts, meant to promote or oppose social change either at the systemic or non-systemic level.”

(Diani, 1992:11)

If there is a sphere in which Anonymous excels, it is in acquiring conflictual relations with new and varied opponents.

Each Operation or Project has a new target, whether it is Project Chanology which focuses upon combatting the ills of the church of scientology, or Operation Payback which focused upon providers who withdrew support for Wikileaks including PayPal, Amazon and Sony, or smaller-scale targets such as the campaign regarding the Steubenville High School rape case which brought the movement into conflict with school officials, local authorities and eventually

law enforcement. We can see it at work on the streets of London at the Million Mask March, each protest cadre has their own opponent: the anti-fracking protesters who oppose the corporations using the technique and the impact they believe it has on the environment, the anti-badger cull protesters opposing DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and the farmers who carry out the cull of badgers on their land in order to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis, and the NHS workers, nurses and doctors on the streets in full uniform but this time sporting also the V mask who oppose the government's decision to cut NHS spending and impose austerity regulations which they believe impacts their ability to carry out a safe and effective health service. These are all very different protest causes, and each has their own opponent, but on the streets of London on November 5th they each wear the mask, and each claim to be part of the Anonymous movement.

The range of issues associated with Anonymous is so great, both political and cultural, both personal and social – from being concerned about the actions of entire states to engaging with the evidence of individual rape cases in the US, the range of opponents which Anonymous sets up for themselves is staggering. Gladwell (2010) believes that this ability to flit between protest issues at a whim, and the low-risk requirement for commitment to the cause robs the movement of its political weight. Those involved with the movement, however, argue that this flexibility and dynamism provides the movement with its most powerful tool: the anonymity of the crowd, the pseudonymity of the internet and the power in numbers.

7.4 Action which primarily occurs outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life

Diani brings several concepts into the discussion on “*non-institutional behaviour*” as distinctive of social movements – that is, activity which significantly differs from the norm.

“Collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 1912) – that is the process by which a community comes together to simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action, and through this process excite and unify the group in that action and *“nascent states”* (Alberoni, 1968, 1983) where an individual becomes more receptive to merging with other people, and creating a new collective with which they might feel solidarity, are both terms which are becoming increasingly considered features of the emergence of social movements, rather than an enduring feature which persists for the life of the movement. Rather, social movements can exist beyond the period of collective effervescence and nascent states and that these phases are not necessarily followed immediately by *“institutionalisation”* which is to say a process whereby ‘fluid’ practices become routinized and standardised and thereby commonly accepted, either by being aligned with existing norms but also by creating new norms. In practice this may lead to a state in which the initial enthusiasm over a new social movement begins to give way to action which do not significantly differ from the norm.

Instead, the interaction between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of action is more complex and, indeed, there may emerge social movements which come into being without the need for a period of collective effervescence or a nascent state at all – if the collective identity is strong enough. In conclusion, Diani states that as we cannot draw a strong enough connection between non-institutional behaviour and social movements then we cannot consider one to be a defining feature of the other, and so we cannot define social movements through their adoption of non-standard patterns of political behaviour.

Additionally, Diani questions whether organisations which are involved in social movements are necessarily *“basically loosely structured”* (Diani, 1992:12). Arguing that “looseness” is an essential property *between* organisations involved in social movements, but not necessarily within them. In my literature review I consider definitions of organisations as synonymous with “the firm”, and suggest that perhaps the concept might be useful in understanding the

organisations involved in social movements if we substitute “profit” in these definitions with “values”, in this way I believe that we can understand communities such as WhyWeProtest and those at the AnonOPs IRC to be organisations – groups of individuals with goals they wish to achieve, who band together to achieve those goals – whether those goals are the end to the misinformation of the church of scientology, justice for victims of an unjust state, or reforms with regards to austerity in the health service and so on.

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”

(Diani, 1992:13)

The definition quoted above is a synthesis itself of the four definitions given before. This final pillar of his definition brings in three important points: first, Diani argues that it is not necessary for a social movement to maintain a “*collective effervescence*” to stave off a move towards more institutionalised forms of behaviour. Second, there is difficulty in defining social movements purely from their engagement with non-institutionalised forms of behaviour, in particular, their engagement with real life protest. Third, that it is also problematic to argue that there is looseness of connections *within* organisations, when he argues that might be a feature of the relationships between them, but not necessarily within them.

Anonymous first began acting as a protest movement with Project Chanology in 2008, and looking back at that time we can clearly identify a collective effervescence which drove the emerging movement forward through those first few operations – Coleman (2010) provides a

very detailed account of those early days, noting the many thousands of people the movement was able to gather for protests outside scientology locations, as well as on the online resources such as AnonOps and social media. Nevertheless, if we are to consider Anonymous a social movement by this definition then one feature we should expect is the maintenance of fervour around the movement past the period of “*collective effervescence*” or the “*nascent state*” experienced in those heady and chaotic early days. WhyWeProtest was a community set up in support of that earliest operation and, according to their own account of the time since then:

“Since its founding, WhyWeProtest has grown and initiated planning and discussion in other pro-free speech areas. WhyWeProtest’s role has been to provide a stable platform to discuss legal methods of protest and information dissemination”

(“The History of WhyWeProtest”: <https://whyweprotest.net/threads/welcome-to-whyweprotest.111548/>)

To this day, WhyWeProtest remains an active and productive source for information regarding scientology. It is a vibrant meeting place for numerous users looking to discuss a wide range of Anonymous operation topics, and share, collate and critique vast amounts of information. Some threads from the very early days of the site still exist, are accessible and still updated, and many of the original administrators still visit and maintain the site.

AnonOps has changed – but persisted. There are regular visitors and, at times, the discussion can be fast paced and chaotic, but other times there will be a message every half an hour – with only the most dedicated anons contributing to the glacially-paced dialogue. The usership has dwindled in comparison to the literally thousands of users who on the channel in its very earliest days between 2008 and 2010, but it is crucially still there, it is perhaps just more diffuse than

it was when AnonOps was the central hub for the newly created behemoth that was Anonymous around Project Chanology and Operation Payback.

AnonUK, however, stands as an example of the type of community I observed which did not survive the original nascent state, or at least they did not survive as long as groups such as WhyWeProtest and AnonOps. This is likely due to the much smaller community associated with the site, and the fact that some of its operations (such as organising local, UK-based protests) can be covered by other, larger, communities such as WhyWeProtest itself, which was a site which many of the community at AnonUK seemed to use to get general information about protests in their area. I observed several such communities even in early 2013 when I was beginning to scout around for potential sites for observation, and it cannot be ignored that though the larger communities such as WWP and AnonOps have survived this long, there are still a great many communities which did not.

For me, the most striking support that Anonymous has persisted after the initial stage of activity is the growing attendance at the Million Mask March. Year-on-year the predicted attendance is larger and larger, each protester as much a member as any other faceless anon next to them – it is the most visual and public display of the movements power to garner support in hundreds of locations across the globe – seemingly materialising out of the ether. I think an important point to draw from my data, however, is that the attendant crowds at the march have certainly changed in that time – growing ever more combative with police and officials, whether this is a feature of the growing attendance numbers or a substantive change in the nature of the people attending is an important question for the way we might interpret this yearly event.

Whilst the fact that two of the communities I studied for this project support the claim that Anonymous, as a movement, has endured beyond the initial phase of collective effervescence

and the nascent state into a movement which has survived almost a decade from its political “birth”, it cannot be ignored that it is perhaps a limitation of my method as, even selecting the communities in 2012/13 as I did, I would likely be drawn to communities which display activity typical of the kind of community which had stood the test of time, and I would undoubtedly pass over quieter or lesser known communities which would stand to refute the claim that Anonymous adheres to this element of Diani’s definition. Regardless, there still exists a strong presence for Anonymous both on the internet, and in real life protests and this should stand to support the argument that the movement adheres to Diani’s definition.

Many of the individuals and groups that I have spoken to over the past four years would likely balk at the suggestion that any kind of label be placed upon the entity that is Anonymous. They consider it to be undefinable, incorporeal and ineffable – there is safety in this opinion, as it means that they can conduct whatever activity they please to combat their target, hidden behind the veil of Anonymity afforded by their mystery. But mystery, misdirection, smoke and mirrors do not truly benefit the cause of Anonymous, because a great deal of their power is derived from their ability to leverage a great many people to their cause in a moment’s notice, and then for those individuals to melt into the ether of the internet just as quickly once the deed is done. This power is given physical form at the real-life protests such as those facilitated by the users at WhyWeProtest and formerly by AnonUK, and of course the Million Mask March.

The question of definition with regards to Anonymous is an important one, they are a phenomenon which draws heavily from previous hacker and hacktivist cultures, organisations and social movements – and they have recapitulated these elements through the lens of modern internet media, and grassroots crowd-sourced protests. Participant I argues that “*Anonymous is the opposite of identity*” and perhaps this is the case, I have observed the many fractured and

conflicting identities within the Anonymous movement. To others, such as participant N: *“Anonymous is not an organization. It is a movement that emphasizes ways of thinking and working.”* Which, again, I can see being a persuasive argument, certainly engaging with Anonymous encourages critical thinking, independence with regards to data and interaction with computer technology. And, perhaps more important still, in comparison to the hacker and hacktivist history from which Anonymous draws much of its culture and practices, Participant R states: *“I think the term “hacktivist” now refers to the fact that Anonymous is effectively harvesting (and sometimes redefining) the power of the internet to decide on and reach its objectives, not that it necessarily “hacks” to get the job done.”* Anonymous is also an entity which has a great variance in practices, whether they are “hacks” or the kind of information sharing in which WhyWeProtest engages. So, Anonymous is defined numerous ways, both by those inside and outside the movement, but I believe despite the great variance in presentation, practice and identity, there are significant features of the entity that is Anonymous that allow us to call it a social movement. The limitations of social movement theory are that it fits quite comfortably with traditional social movements, which are comprised of many of the things that Anonymous is not: hierarchy, a focus on real life protest and other protest mediums in the real world, an identifiable and definable membership, and so it struggles to accommodate the more flexible and dynamic nature of a movement such as Anonymous, and the more internet-based methods they employ. The next chapter, in the conclusion to this thesis, I will discuss a few ways in which I believe social movement theory might be updated to engage with more modern protests movements such as Anonymous.

8.0 Conclusion

This project was an attempt to understand a community which has anonymity at its core. When so much of community at large is based upon camaraderie, consensus and familiarity – can an entity which builds its foundations upon intentional obfuscation of identity be an effective protest body, and if so, what form might that entity take? The time between 2008, when Anonymous emerged into the public consciousness, and 2013 when this project began in earnest saw significant changes for the Anonymous movement. The time between that date, and the date of writing is just as long – and the changes have been perhaps just as great. The data I have drawn is a snapshot of this brief period of the communities which I studied and should be considered so – I expect that there will continue to be significant changes within the Anonymous movement over the coming years.

The start of the project was defined by the ethical and methodological questions thrown up by approaching such a community. We notified the university registrar of the intention of the project, and there were several rounds of ethical approval required before the project could commence. Questions regarding safety of participants, the University and department, and of course myself as a researcher entering what was understood to be a somewhat volatile community. We wrangled with questions of how to appropriately tackle such a community, what level of anonymity should I afford myself in response to their own anonymity, and how much information I should be willing to release to my potential research participants. Ultimately, I feel we made the right choice in opening the study to the participants, keeping them fully informed about the process and placing the “ball” squarely in their “court” – and I believe that as a result I could draw some insightful and meaningful data from the communities with which I spoke. I believe this approach also limited the ethical issues which might have arisen had I chosen an approach where that information was less up-front.

I have been drawn into places both online and in the real world where I believe I would never have stood if it were not for the project. The centre of a swirling mass of protesters, surrounded by riot police – or pushing through a police line as they advance on a bank of masked men and women. Forums where passionate people pour over leaked documents, sequestered from the wire of the secretive church of scientology and countless other unique experiences which have contributed to the past five years.

I have met a great many stimulating, interesting and arresting people in that time. People who have directly challenged me, demanding that I speak for myself before they would be willing to speak to me for the study. People who have, in a simple sentence, changed the course of this project with only a few words and will likely never know it. The conclusions in this final chapter are the sum of those parts, not just the pen and paper notes at the Million Mask March, or the word document shorthand produced during the online observations and interviews, but also the cavalcade of experiences through which this project has drawn me since it began five years ago.

8.1 The case against Anonymous as an Identity

For most of the lifetime of this thesis, the title was *“Can Hacktivism be Understood as the Performance of a Collective Digital Identity?”*. This title, in truth, emerges from several requirements: a project such as a PhD must have a title – there are forms to fill in, reports to write and spreadsheets to populate – at a certain point “tbc” will not suffice and university administrators will come calling. Much like Deseriis’ description of the “Proper Name”, the title is a tool – it objectifies the work and refers to it in a number of arenas. At the very start of the project, prior to any preliminary work, this is how the idea of Anonymous as an idea was first floated – I was looking for an actionable means to approach online identity, and my nascent ideas about Anonymous suggested that there may be interesting

insights into the subject to be found within the murky passageways and tunnels of modern hacktivist culture.

The title, and more specifically the focus upon “identity”, also reflects early assumptions I had about the Anonymous movement and decentralised movements as a whole: individuals participating in these movements reject personal identity, and in their actions through the Anonymous’ improper name, they instead adopt the collective identity of “the hacker” or, in Anonymous’ case, the white V mask. If I consider the Million Mask March in November 2013 to be the first day of data collection, then I might reasonably argue that it took approximately five to six minutes for that pre-data-collection assumption to be proven untenable. So diverse were the identities on show, and all under the same Anonymous banner, that it was very clear that I would have to reconsider my perspective on Anonymous. This experience of reconfiguration with regards to my own assumptions happened numerous times throughout my time with the movement, and in each case I was required to reflect upon my own work and all future work I intended to carry out.

This shift has been stated a few times throughout the thesis, but it is important enough to require pulling out and clarifying here: this was a shift from understanding the identity of Anonymous as built upon consensus, sameness and universality to something containing a far greater degree of complexity. I found Social Movement Theory to be the most appropriate schema through which to begin to understand those complexities.

8.2 Anonymous are a Social Movement

Initially, I set out to examine identity in a space where it was absent. Anonymous presented the most compelling subject I could identify where this was the case: an entity which explicitly rejects and hides personal identity and uses a mask as its symbol. My data collection commenced around the time of the Million Mask March in November 2013 and continued

through to the same event in 2015 – in a way these two protests book-end the beginning and the end of my data collection. As I covered in the discussion section, as I began to observe the community both online and offline it became increasingly clear that understanding Anonymous as a single cohesive collective identity would not be possible, considering the great variance in presentation I observed across the online and offline incarnations of the movement. So, I broadened my approach and began to engage with academic theories which embrace a plurality of identities with the social formation, one such concept was that of the social movement.

Reading the various social movement theories since the 1960s: collective behaviour from Turner and Killian (1987), resource mobilization theory from Zald and McCarthy (1977), political process from Charles Tilly (1984) and finally New Social Movement theory from Touraine (1981) and Alberto Melucci (1985/1989) I found each compelling, but ultimately, I also found many criticisms. Not least of all the article by Mario Diani (1992) around which I ultimately chose to structure my discussion: Diani argues that many academic studies skip the substantive question of what a social movement is because there is no unified definition upon which they might draw. He concludes that it is possible to unify elements of each of the four social movement theories as detailed above into a synthesized definition which incorporates the most enduring elements in each into a single unified definition:

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”

(Diani, 1992:13)

It is this synthesized definition that I used to structure my argument and compare my data to see whether we might consider Anonymous to be a social movement by its definition: and I believe that we can. Though, not without a little tweaking.

To conclude, here are the main outputs from this thesis:

Anonymous is a movement which is comprised of a plurality of actors, organisations and groups which are loosely connected via a network of interconnected nodes. WhyWeProtest, AnonOps and AnonUK are (or were, in the case of AnonUK) distinct communities with ties to one another, but the connections are not formal akin to an official partnership or business deal – instead they share culture, language, practice, beliefs and values. Most of all, they share the Anonymous moniker.

Second, the various organisations, actors and groups associated with Anonymous, to a degree, share a set of opinions, beliefs and values. I covered how this is perhaps the most problematic of all the elements of the social movement theory to apply to Anonymous, but nonetheless I noted the numerous ways in which these distinct actors had shared characteristics, for example, using a similar colloquial language, broadly sharing opinions on the anti-hierarchical nature of the movement and the use of humour as a means to approach their areas of protest. As well as the ways in which they differ – for example, the difference in the approach to protest practice, with WWP rejecting all illegal activity and focusing on information gathering as a means to an end, whereas AnonOps IRC facilitating more practical hacking through their channels devoted to the subject. Diani's definition of social movements, however, does acknowledge that there might be variance within the movement with regards to identities, so it might be possible that these differences can be accommodated for in the definition.

Anonymous engage in conflictual relations with many different targets. It might have appeared that at first, they were very much a community associated with protesting for freedom of speech and freedom of information when examining their early online activity, but clearly, having spent time at the Million Mask March, since the earliest days of Project Chanology and Operation Payback this remit has somewhat widened. Consequently, the range of opponents is

substantial: personal, social, cultural and political targets – nation states and individual people. If conflictual relations with an opponent is a significant element of a social movement, then Anonymous have more than enough opponents to fill this particular requirement.

Finally, the Anonymous movement has persevered beyond the nascent state and the period of collective effervescence, and though many communities have risen and fallen in support of various Operations over the years – there still exists an enduring and passionate online and offline community in support of the movement. These remaining anons still champion the Anonymous cause, they believe in its values of anonymity, independence and skepticism, and they still come together in great numbers both online and offline to contribute to the movement.

Considering these four key elements of the definition: a network of informal interactions, a shared set of opinions and beliefs, conflictual relations with an opponent and enduring non-institutionalized behavior I believe that we can say with some certainty that Anonymous should be considered a social movement.

8.3 Limitations of Social Movement Theories

There are undoubtedly ways in which social movement theories might be updated to better accommodate the modern elements of the Anonymous movement. I will detail some criticisms of the theory here, and ways in which these, considering my conclusions, might feed into some suggestions about how we might update traditional social movement theories.

The sociological study of social movements is relatively new, yet the traditional theories of social movements as detailed in the above section tend to focus upon groups which engage in more established forms of protest practice, namely real-life rallies and street protests. Diani (1992) acknowledges that it is not necessarily correct to define a movement by their adoption

of these kinds of practices, and rather in defining social movements we should consider other protest practices. Studies have shown that modern internet technologies (such as social media) can afford many advantages to advocacy groups with regards to activism (Obar, 2014).

In Anonymous' case much of their protest practice occurs online, and is reliant upon internet technology to gather information and disseminate it to followers of the movement, as well as the more controversial hacking techniques for which the movement is known which operate exclusively over the internet. Even the street protests "organized" by Anonymous are supported and advertised heavily through social media technologies such as Twitter and Facebook – I observed and participated in a great deal of interaction with regards to the Million Mask March both on the day and in the time before and after the event. Writing regarding Anonymous' use of online vs offline tactics in Australia, Peter John Chen, for example, argues that the drama and "high tech" nature of methods such as DDoS attacks retain many of the "dramaturgical effects" of street protests – but the social meaning of such attacks are still unclear, and many people misunderstand the significance of the crimes they are committing in those acts as the law tends to lend some affordances to the disruption of physical spaces for the purposes of street protests, but does not provide the same affordances to online protest (Chen, 2013:155-156). Social movement theories must acknowledge and incorporate these more technologically-facilitated methods and consider them central to the definition of the concept, rather than as a supplement or simply being in support of traditional protest methods such as marches and rallies.

8.4 The Importance of This Project and Further Study

When they first burst into the public consciousness in 2008, Anonymous was a radical break from the standard formation of social movements. Though its cultural heritage can be traced

back through such roots as the early hardware hackers of the 1970s and other grassroots movements such as the Zapatistas of Mexico, Anonymous emerged with such ferocity from the shadows that it was difficult to ignore. It could easily have burned out after its original collective effervescence, but almost a decade later the movement still exists, can garner significant support both online and offline and has evolved dramatically.

Whilst there is a great deal of academic interest in the movement, this project is important as an attempt to place a definition on the social formation that Anonymous takes, and in concluding that formation to be a social movement, I believe that it contributes to the knowledge base upon which we might be able to draw to further understand the movement as it continues to evolve in the coming years.

There are still avenues for academic exploration, however. As can be seen from the changes undergone by the movement since 2008 to the present day, Anonymous is subject to almost constant change and the definition of the movement may continue change significantly over the coming years. If this is the case, as I believe it will be, then further study may be required to understand the nature of that change and whether these changes might alter the perception of the movement as a whole. Any changes which the movement does undergo should not impact significantly upon the conclusions drawn as part of this project, however, as these conclusions are the output of a brief snapshot of the movement as it presented itself in 2013, 2015 and the intervening period.

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