Sauter, Molly. "Show me what an activist looks like: DDoS as a method of biographical impact." *The Coming Swarm: DDoS Actions, Hactivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 77–88. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781628926705.0010>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:42 UTC.

Copyright © Molly Sauter 2014. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Show me what an activist looks like: DDoS as a method of biographical impact

We've looked at direct action and media manipulation through their specific theories of change, models of practice, and historical case studies. Another model for the use of DDoS in activism is as a tool of "biographical impact," or the impact the experience of participation has on the individual activist. Doug McAdam traced biographical impact as it occurred among activists who participated in Freedom Rides during the Civil Rights Movement, measuring to what extent activist participation could predict future political radicalization and involvement. He differentiated between two varieties of biographical impact: conversion and alternation. "Conversion" is defined as "a radical transformation of a person's life, including their self-conception, network of associations and larger worldview . . . [which] tends to occur in groups that demand the exclusive loyalties of its members and maintain a hostile stance toward mainstream society."¹ The milder "alternation" consists of "identity changes that are not as drastic as conversion . . . which are part of or grow out of existing programs of behavior."² Alternation can take place in groups that are "relatively more inclusive and

tolerant of the other attachment of its members” but which “. . . can be very demanding of a person’s time, energy, and loyalties.”³ The more culturally immersive an activist’s experience is, in terms of exposure to like-minded peers, the creation of social and technical structures of support and interaction, and the furnishing of a vocabulary to articulate the experience, the more likely it is to result in alternation or conversion on the part of the individual.

Does participating in a DDoS action make a person more likely to stay politically involved? Could a DDoS action be considered a radicalizing moment for its participants? McAdam’s language of biographical impact, conversion, and alternation provide the tools needed to examine what, if any, impact a DDoS action has on the people involved.

Here, it is particularly useful to remember that DDoS is often most effectively used within the context of a larger campaign, wherein multiple tactics are utilized. Ideally, these tactics each reinforce a certain ideological stance of the group and provide opportunities to lead participants from one tactical action to another. In this chapter I argue that Anonymous, because of certain aspects of how its culture functions and perpetuates, is particularly apt to have a strong biographical impact on participants rising to the level of alternation.

The culture of the Hive

The precise nature of Anonymous is a difficult thing to pin down, but it is best described as a “culture.”⁴ Quinn Norton articulates the characterization of Anonymous-as-culture this way:

It takes cultures to have albums, idioms, and iconography, and I was swimming in these and more. Anonymous is a nascent and small culture, but one with its own aesthetics and values, art and literature, social norms and ways of production, and even its own dialectic language.⁵

David Auerbach identifies Anonymous with what he calls “A-culture,” a set of larger cultural norms and practices that broadly encompass the trolling, anonymous, internet-based subaltern counter public of which Anonymous is a part. A-culture is strongly defined by the online communications technologies on which it was originally reliant. These technologies were text and static-image based, fundamentally anonymous in their attribution structure, and “evanescent,” containing no archive of interactions or communications. Core to A-culture, Auerbach observes, are the practices of ironizing, recreational offense, self-documentation, elitism, and heightened meta-awareness, coupled with persistent economies of suspicion and unreality.⁶ I would add to this highly democratized modes of appropriation-based production, which, while being extremely social and open, operate as an effective shibboleth into the active culture. Knowledge of and competencies with certain suites of cultural reference are expected of participants. The ability to actively participate in the production of cultural artifacts, using a practice-vocabulary based in the appropriation and remix of images from popular culture and A-culture itself, is also expected.

The evolution of Anonymous from an inward-facing group concerned with its own amusement often at the expense of outsiders to an open activist culture adept at attention-building and attractive to the uninitiated occurred over time, though several trigger events hastened developments significantly. Prior to the WikiLeaks-related actions of 2010, Anonymous was known in part for the internet memes which spilled forth from the board (some examples are rickrollingⁱ and lolcats,ⁱⁱ) and in part for the intensely personal harassment campaigns and aggressive “raids” it conducted across the internet.⁷

ⁱ“Rickrolling” is a “bait and switch” meme, wherein a person is tricked into clicking on a link leading to Rick Astley’s 1987 “Never Gonna Give You Up” music video.

ⁱⁱLolcats are pictures of cats with humorous text inscribed on them, written in a specific tailored grammar. For more on lolcats, please see the excellent work of Kate Miltner.

Sometimes these raids were DDoS actions; at other times they were site invasions, wherein massive numbers of Anons would converge on a site to monopolize comment threads or occupy locations in massively multiplayer online games.⁸ A key factor was the aesthetic of “doing it for the lulz,” an agenda of having fun at the expense of another.⁹ Like many active in hacker and internet culture, Anons valued free speech and the autonomy of the internet, although their early raids were more often than not focused on showing up their target and generally causing hilarious (to them) chaos.

Beginning in 2008 with Operation Chanology, the actions of Anonymous began to take on a more overtly political tone. Operation Chanology targeted the Church of Scientology, initially for attempting to force the takedown of a video featuring Tom Cruise talking about the church, but the Op’s list of grievances later expanded to more general objections to the church itself.¹⁰ The operation involved DDoS actions and other digital tactics as well as physical-world street protests. It marked the first occasion Anonymous raids crossed over into the physical world, with masked Anons gathering outside Scientology Centers in various cities and countries, holding signs and protesting the church’s policies. This was a controversial step among Anons. Some objected to taking Anon actions to the streets, arguing that Anonymous should restrict its actions to the online space.ⁱⁱⁱ Others felt that the political tone of Operation Chanology was in opposition to the “spirit of the lulz” that had previously defined Anonymous.¹¹ Operation Chanology represented a shift in the makeup and tenor of Anonymous. The “lulz” lost its purity of purpose, and raids began to represent a developing political sensibility,

ⁱⁱⁱPrevious to this, the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), *the electrohippies*, etoy, and other groups had used DDoS as a tactic within larger campaigns, often in coordination with other organizations. Anonymous’ internal dispute about coupling street protests with DDoS actions and other digital tactics is special to Anonymous, and arose in part because of the “internet-native” nature of the group, which had previously been active only in the online space.

one heavily influenced by internet libertarianism, free-speech absolutism, moderate levels of anarchy,¹² and a strongly held belief in the ethical treatment of cats.¹³

Anonymous' activist incarnation is primarily represented by two visual icons: the Guy Fawkes mask, and an empty black suit. Of these, the Guy Fawkes mask has proven the more durable, and more effective, representation. It is also an efficient metaphor for the identity subsumation that occurs as individuals become involved in Anonymous actions. Anonymous' conception of identity within the culture is at base a pluralistic one. The power and attraction of Anonymous is built out of the concept of the hoard, the mass, the unstoppable wave. "We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us," is the unofficial motto of Anonymous. It appears in videos, image macros, and all manner of viral media produced by and around Anonymous. The phrase "We are legion" comes from the Gospel of Mark, from the story where Jesus exorcises a demon from a possessed man. When asked for its name, the demon replies, "αὐτῷ Λεγιὼν ὀνομά μοι, ὅτι πολλοί ἐσμεν:" meaning, "I am [called] legion, for we are many." The original phrase, perhaps better than the Anonymous adaptation, captures the peculiar nature of the Anonymous identity meme, wherein many different identities are drawn up and into a single identity. One central source is made more powerful by the participation of many individuals. But those individual identities move in and out of different states of participation. Individuals join in under the banner of Anonymous, temporarily subsuming their personalities under the larger, metapersonality of the Anonymous hoard.¹⁴

Adding to the collective identity nature of Anonymous is its use of collective pseudonyms or "improper names," as described by Marco Deseriis.¹⁵ Deseriis notes that improper names, as they are extended to and pass among multiple participants, empower individuals by blurring the line between an autonomous actor and the crowd behind her. Such improper names also extend the zone of influence of individuals, as

each action taken under the collective pseudonym becomes incorporated into the overarching sense of identity.¹⁶

A technological parallel for this, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 6, is the “Hive Mind” mode built into a version of the LOIC DDoS tool, which was popular during the Operation Payback DDoS actions. When running in Hive Mind mode, rather than independently targeting and deploying the tool, a participant choreography familiar from the EDT’s and *the electrohippies’* use of the FloodNet tool, you could instead place your computer under the control of a central IRC server. By joining this voluntary botnet, you were able to add your individual digital voice to the stream of other voices being controlled by an overarching persona: “I am legion, for we are many.”

Three aspects of Anonymous culture and activist practice make it more likely that individuals who participate in the Operation Payback DDoS actions would experience alternation or conversion as a result. First, the communications channels used for planning, publicity, and in-group socializing were often open and public. These included many IRC channels and various social media accounts. Through IRC and social media channels, participants were immersed in a like-minded peer community, one in the throes of an intensely active period whose energy persisted after the end of the Operation Payback actions. Very shortly after the end of Operation Payback, the Arab Spring, the HBGary hack, Occupy Wall Street, a number of high profile hacker arrests, and other events repeatedly triggered and reinforced the activist instincts of the Anonymous population, who continued to use the communications practices used in Operation Payback.

Second, Anonymous visual culture relies on appropriation and remix practices, liberally quoting from pop culture and from itself in persistent, repetitive cycles of production. This means the ability to quickly produce highly relevant cultural products is easily available to members of the in-group, already privy to the layers of meaning and reference contained

within the symbols. For outsiders, particularly outsiders in the media, the hieroglyphic nature of Anonymous visual culture, which during Operation Payback and its aftermath was experiencing a super-proliferation online, made the images and videos highly useful for their reductive, symbolic value. The use by the media of these artifacts of Anonymous visual culture to represent Anonymous further reinforced their value as metasymbolic objects within the culture and made their production a more experientially valuable enterprise. As the visual culture spread, the ability to repeatedly produce culturally consistent artifacts became a more important marker of insider status than simply recognizing or correctly interpreting specific cultural tropes.

Third, the “hive” model of action valued by Anonymous activists, which requires a merging of personal agency and identity with an overarching supra-identity structure, assigns all participants the activist identity, regardless of experience or participation level. Even “passive” participants whose favored mode of participation was turning on Hive Mind and walking away could be seen as just as important to the success of the action as those who man their terminals for the duration. Those who had considered themselves to be an audience in the world of politics and industry could become actors, strengthened by the invisible yet palpable presence of thousands of their new comrades-in-arms.

All these factors reinforce one another and channel participants from one impactful activity to the next. An individual may initially encounter a call-to-action on Twitter, participate in a DDoS action, and subsequently contribute to planning chats, collaborative manifesto writing, or video production. Each draws the participant deeper into the culture and creates more opportunities for biographical impact. Participants may also dip into one or two activities, or participate once and never return to the culture. However, the cultural nature of Anonymous actions fosters many opportunities for participation for those who are interested.

Anonymous' hacker identity

Although early practitioners of mass DDoS actions sought to create an overarching collective identity for their actions, it usually extended only to a vaguely defined "witnessing" crowd, similar to how Ricardo Dominguez described the participants in the etoy/toywar DDoS action: "... a global group of people gathered to bear witness to a wrong."¹⁷ This is in keeping with the EDT's underlying conceit of DDoS as "virtual sit-in." The internet-based nature of the DDoS releases the participant from the challenges of distance and physical space, but she is still valued as a far-flung, unaffiliated individual. She does not participate because she is culturally obligated, but because the networked nature of the DDoS allows her to add her presence to whatever cause she feels drawn to. A unified, restrictive cultural identity would have undercut the "global" mass action aesthetic sought (but not always achieved) by the organizers, particularly in actions which purposefully crossed national borders, such as the EDT's Zapatista actions or the Strano Netstrikes, a series of DDoS actions in December of 1995 targeting the websites of various French government offices in protest against their nuclear policies. The actions were organized by an Italian group called the Strano Network, led by Tommaso Tozzi.¹⁸ As will be explored in Chapter 6, however, the EDT's reliance on very specific sociopolitical and linguistic frames within their actions, though not an overt cultural identity, served to restrict the global distribution of their actions.

While the EDT and other groups based their political philosophies and group cultures within wide frames of anticapitalist/anticorporate globalization activist culture, Anonymous actions are strongly embedded within the restricted, bounded, cultural frame of A-culture. This allowed participants to immerse themselves in a pervasive activist setting, and added to the biographical impact value of participating in the action. This culture also contains a deeply performative aspect.

Drawing on media tropes of hackers and technology, as well as internet meme culture, Anonymous culture plays with stereotypes to create a public identity that is anarchic, humorous, and trollish, feeding off the fearful or angry reactions of the uninformed. This is generally known as “for the lulz.” As explained by Gabriella Coleman:

Trolling on 4chan often consists of an unpredictable combination of the following: 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. Since at least 2006, “Anonymous” has conducted many such trolling campaigns. The motivating force and emotional consequence for the instigators of many acts of trolling, including those on 4chan, are cited as the “lulz,” a pluralization and bastardization of laugh out loud (lol). Lulz denotes the pleasures of trolling, but the lulz is not exclusive to trolling. The lulz can also refer more generally to lighthearted and amusing jokes, images, and pranks.¹⁹

The hacker figure featured prominently in news media and film is a type of modern folk devil. Based in apocalyptic techno-paranoia, popular media stokes common fears that armies of basement-dwelling adolescent males are eager to dish out vindictive mayhem to a society so tied to technology (and yet so clueless as to its inner workings) that it would be unable to adequately defend itself. The hacker in this story is a dark, unseen force in the network, decentralized and able to cause havoc far from his physical location. Socially alienated and cut off from normal moral checks, he engages in pathological, compulsive behaviors with other hackers. The characterization of such a pathological cycle of behavior is cited by James Aho as critical to the demonizing of the social enemy, a role the hacker figure occupies in our modern technology-reliant society.²⁰ The hacker’s nights are spent trying to outdo other hackers in technological feats of

mayhem and disruption, and his skills are beyond the ken of any “normal” person.²¹

Anonymous has seized delightedly upon this mythological figure, further reveling in epithets attached to them by the news media, such as “Internet Hate Machine,” originally coined in a hysterical news segment aired by a FOX affiliate in July of 2007. Their slogan, “We are Anonymous. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us,” evokes the omnipresent threat of the locationless hacker. Though their methods, and DDoS in particular, may be fairly simplistic technologically, they are advanced enough to confuse the majority of the public, including law enforcement and the news media, who are happy to assign the “hacker” moniker to any nonmainstream technological practice deemed newsworthy. The Anonymous-as-hacker cultural image is a collaboration of sorts between Anonymous and the media, with Anonymous culture happily playing to type as the news media repeats and reinforces the stereotype. Anonymous’ adoption of the hacker-figure, a figure generally interpreted as criminal in the media and popular culture, further reinforces the widely perceived nature of DDoS actions as inherently criminal. This complicates Anonymous’ attempts to use DDoS as a form of political activism.

The embrace of the media’s antisocial hacker figure is also another performance of dissent on the part of Anonymous. By embodying the ultimate boogeyman of the modern technological age, Anonymous rejects the social order as undesirable and irredeemable. By performing the empowered outcast,^{iv} they also perform *symbolic exit*.²² Anonymous as a culture symbolically exits the mainstream, commercialized internet, overrun with private interests and attempts at state-based governance, and sets itself up as the theatrical

^{iv}Though the hacker folk devil is unmistakably a thoroughly othered outcast, he is also seen as being a techno-wizard, capable and willing of upsetting the entirety of modern society with a few key strokes.

embodiment of the internet as it could to be: anarchic, absurdist, free of outside interference.^v

Notes

- 1 Doug McAdam, "The Biographical Consequences of Activism," *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 745.
- 2 McAdam, "Biographical Consequences of Activism," 745.
- 3 Ibid., 746.
- 4 Quinn Norton, "Anonymous 101: An introduction to the lulz," *Wired*, November 2011. Last accessed February 25, 2014, <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/11/anonymous-101>; David Auerbach, "Anonymity as Culture: Treatise," *Triple Canopy* 15 (2012). Retrieved from http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__treatise. Last accessed February 25, 2014.
- 5 Norton, "Anonymous 101."
- 6 Auerbach, "Anonymity as Culture."
- 7 Coleman, "Our weirdness is free."
- 8 Gabriella Coleman, "Geek politics and Anonymous," 2011. Retrieved from <http://re-publica.de/11/blog/panel/geek-politics-and-anonymous/>. Last accessed February 25, 2014.
- 9 Coleman, "Our weirdness is free."

^vGabriella Coleman pointed out in response to an early draft of this section that Anonymous' use of the hacker image is not universal, and has in several instances been rejected by various participants in the culture. This brings to the fore the question of how much of Anonymous' use of the "hacker" identity is a reaction to the media's use of the characterization, and how much is internally developed. It is my view that Anonymous trollishly exploits the media's overuse of the "hacker" image primarily to manipulate the culture's perceived "mystique" by outsiders, and secondarily to maintain an internal, tongue-in-cheek reflection of their own A-culture. But, as with most aspects of Anonymous, these uses of the "hacker" image are not universally accepted.

- 10 Ibid.; R. Vichot, “*Doing it for the lulz?*”: *Online communities of practice and offline tactical media* (Master’s thesis, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2009), 21–5.
- 11 Gabriella Coleman, “Anonymous: From lulz to collective action,” *Media Commons*, April 6, 2011. Last accessed February 25, 2014. Retrieved from <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action>.
- 12 Coleman, “From lulz to collective action.”
- 13 Know Your Meme, “Dusty the Cat.” Last accessed February 2014, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/kenny-glenn-case-dusty-the-cat>.
- 14 Molly Sauter, “Guy Fawkes Mask-ology,” *HiLow Brow*, April 30, 2012. Last accessed February 25, 2014, <http://hilobrow.com/2012/04/30/mask/>.
- 15 Marco Deseriis, “Is Anonymous a New Form of Luddism? A Comparative Analysis of Industrial Machine Breaking, Computer Hacking, and Related Rhetorical Struggles,” *Radical History Review* 117 (2013): 35.
- 16 Deseriis, “Is Anonymous a New Form of Luddism?,” 43.
- 17 Ricardo Dominguez quoted in Wark, “Toywars.”
- 18 Alessandro Ludovico, “‘Error loading . . .’ Ten years ago, the first netstrikes took place.” Last accessed February 25, 2014, http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1590&lang=en%5D; Thomas, “Ethics of Hacktivism.”
- 19 Coleman, “From lulz to collective action.”
- 20 James Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994).
- 21 Sauter, “If Hackers Didn’t Exist.”
- 22 Tommie Shelby, “Impure Dissent: Hip Hop and the Political Ethics of Marginalized Black Urban Youth,” *Youth, New Media, and Political Participation*. Forthcoming (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).