

# Gopher, Translator, and Trickster

## *The Ethnographer and the Media*

GABRIELLA COLEMAN

Three days after a pair of brothers stormed the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and brutally gunned down scores of journalists during the magazine’s morning meeting in Paris, the countercultural digital activists known as Anonymous launched #OpCharlieHebdo. In a video announcing this political maneuver, a Flemish branch of Anonymous declared, “It’s obvious that some people don’t want, in a free world, this sacrosanct right to express in any way one’s opinions. Anonymous has always fought for the freedom of speech, and will never let this right be smirched by obscurantism and mysticism. *Charlie Hebdo*, historical figure of satirical journalism has been targeted.”<sup>1</sup> The effect was pretty much immediate. A bevy of journalistic outfits—stretching from the most mainstream of establishments to the most boutique of niche technological blogs—churned out stories about the intervention, deeming it unusual for at least one reason: Anonymous, so often taking a confrontational stance toward Western governments, this time appeared to be bolstering those very governments’ interests.

As became customary following any large or distinctive Anonymous intervention, about half a dozen media requests came my way, in this case, regarding the retaliatory operation. By this time I had found the vast majority of these queries to be predictable: equipped with basic information about Anonymous, journalists would ask probing questions about the specific intervention in question, presumably with the aim of filling in the gaps of their knowledge (and also acquiring a tasty sound bite). This time, however, one journalist deviated from this norm—and not in a laudable fashion. On January 11, 2015, a reporter for one of the major three-lettered U.S. national

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

1 networks contacted me by email, and it wasn't long before we connected on  
2 the phone. Like so many other journalists laboring under a looming deadline,  
3 he cut right to the chase, asking me to connect him to a participant in the  
4 collective willing to speak that evening on the national news telecast.

5 The request, while difficult to fulfill, was not unusual; by that time I had  
6 introduced Anonymous participants to journalists at least a couple of dozen  
7 times. What was exceptional was his stubborn insistence on the particular  
8 Anonymous participant he wanted to interview: "the Julian Assange figure of  
9 Anonymous." Stunned by this ill-informed solicitation (the vast majority of  
10 journalists had studied enough to learn that Anonymous was premised on an  
11 ideal of leaderlessness or were at least more aware of the gaps in their knowl-  
12 edge), I first had to muzzle my laughter before transitioning into a role I had  
13 once occupied fairly often, that of a cultural translator and ambassador. I  
14 offered a version of the following explanation: Because Anonymous eschews  
15 leadership there is no "Julian Assange figure." I hammered deeper into this  
16 point, drawing from years of anthropological research. Participants are so  
17 quick to ostracize leaders and fame seekers, I continued, that it has prevented  
18 the development of an official leader, and even the emergence of a spokesper-  
19 son is rare. While many Anons respect Assange and have supported him and  
20 his causes, there is no equivalent Assange figure in Anonymous. I finished by  
21 telling him that while Anons have appeared on TV before, it took some mea-  
22 sure of work to earn their trust, so it was not likely that I or he could convince  
23 someone to agree to an interview in a single day.

24 Seemingly undeterred and unconvinced by my explanations, he became  
25 more aggressive in his pursuit by attempting to bribe me, suggesting that if  
26 I helped him a producer might later seek me out to publicly comment on  
27 matters related to hacking. Now annoyed, I opted to offer help but only in a  
28 roundabout manner, as a sort of test. Would he, I wondered, put in the effort  
29 to seek out Anonymous for himself, based only on counsel? I offered to facili-  
30 tate his contact with the operatives by teaching him how to get on their chat  
31 channel. I sent an email with basic instructions for how to join their commu-  
32 nication infrastructure, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), attached to a promise of  
33 further help once he was there. Unsurprisingly he failed the test. I never saw  
34 him on the channels nor heard back from him.

35 The wake of this exchange provided an ideal moment to reflect on my  
36 many years of interactions with journalists, an incidental byproduct of my  
37 multiyear anthropological study of Anonymous, which culminated in a popu-  
38 lar ethnography on the topic published by a trade press. This case was striking

# PROOF

for being anomalous; after my brief exchange with the reporter, I recall thinking that he was not only the single most clueless, uninformed journalist I had ever spoken to but, thankfully, had become the exception. That day it dawned on me that just as my view of Anonymous changed after being in the trenches with them, so too did my views on journalists shift after clocking so many hours with them. Fieldwork, which at first centered almost exclusively on interactions with activists, very quickly came to involve a near constant engagement with the journalistic field: over a roughly five-year period I was interviewed by roughly three hundred journalists, wrote numerous op-ed pieces, and eventually contributed extensive background information for a series of investigative articles, documentaries, and a web-based television documentary series. My book, while rooted foremost in an ethnographic sensibility, also adopted several journalistic conventions. Initially skeptical of the general enterprise of journalism, especially its most commercial or mainstream incarnations, I had grown not only to respect many journalists but had also become deeply entangled with the fourth estate.

In what follows I recount the distinct roles I adopted during my interactions with journalists, most often the roles of a translator and gopher, eventually a prolific broker, and on occasion a trickster. I occupied these positions for multiple reasons that shifted over time. Initially I traded my access to media outlets for the promise of publicity to the attention-hungry Anonymous activists I was studying. Eventually the task of shaping popular understandings of Anonymous via established media channels became more interesting as a political end in itself. And ultimately, as I wrote my book, I saw journalism as indispensable for publicizing the plight of Anonymous activists, especially hackers, rounded up by the state.<sup>2</sup> I conclude by reflecting on why the contemporary moment is especially ideal for experts to engage with journalistic publics.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

# PROOF

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

**Conclusion**

On November 13, 2015, terrorists struck again in Paris. This ambush was even more brutal and grim than the *Hebdo* attacks: ISIS operatives murdered scores of people who were enjoying an evening out. In the aftermath Anonymous

1 issued a declaration of war against ISIS. It wasn't the first time; ten months  
2 earlier some Anons had begun fighting back against the organization under  
3 the guise of OpIsis. But it prompted those involved with the op to redouble  
4 their efforts and an Italian wing of Anonymous to initiate a distinct endeavor,  
5 fittingly dubbed OpParis. Both ops aimed to monkey-wrench the well-oiled  
6 ISIS online propaganda machine by taking down websites, flagging social  
7 media sites for removal, and, in rarer instances, gathering intelligence and chan-  
8 neling it directly to Western law enforcement.

9 A number of longtime Anonymous participants were thrown into an ethi-  
10 cal tizzy over these two operations and the media attention they triggered.  
11 The largest Anonymous Twitter account, Your Anonymous News, posted a  
12 denunciation: "We think it's great if people want to hack ISIS and publish  
13 their secrets. But engaging in social media censorship campaigns and dealing  
14 with intelligence contractors and government agents is deeply stupid. The  
15 former will contribute to legitimize the spread of internet censorship and will  
16 lead to the increased censorship for everyone, including Anonymous."<sup>25</sup> A  
17 respected Anonymous hacker, blackplans, decried the moment in a tweet as a  
18 "media cheerleading frenzy."<sup>26</sup>

19 Yet even as the Anonymous offensive against ISIS was distinguishing itself  
20 as one of the most internally unpopular operations to date, the mainstream  
21 media bubbled over with giddiness about the entity's supposedly new direc-  
22 tion. Some variation of the headline "Anonymous at Cyberwar with ISIS"  
23 crowned dozens of articles. As had been the case in previous instances where  
24 an Anonymous operation involved an antiterrorist mandate, cable news net-  
25 works were quick to report, so quick in fact that participants in OpParis had  
26 yet to do anything beyond releasing a video.

27 It wasn't long before I was drowning in media requests. Keeping with re-  
28 cent tradition, most of the media professionals who approached me arrived  
29 well stocked with enough basic knowledge about the workings and logic of  
30 Anonymous to ask intelligent questions and modulate their subsequent que-  
31 ries. Yet, once again, the journalistic exception reared its head, this time in the  
32 form of a producer for a U.S. cable news network. Shortly after we began to  
33 chat she revealed her desire to feature the "leader" of Anonymous on her eve-  
34 ning news show. Fortunately she proved less arrogant than the journalist I  
35 described earlier. Admitting her ignorance, she adjusted her expectations  
36 after I politely explained why this was impossible. (Nevertheless in instances  
37 like these I wonder whether under different circumstances—say, if I were a  
38

# PROOF

white male professor of political science working for the Harvard Kennedy School—I might have been invited to clarify this issue myself, on the air, as an expert.)

Yet this time the mainstream media’s failure to capture the underlying reality of Anonymous’s involvement in a situation ironically resulted in a positive outcome. While the coverage was largely premised on misunderstanding that a cyberwar could be waged on social media platforms and the bogus generalization of an unpopular, fringe sentiment to the entirety of Anonymous, the bulk of the mainstream media coverage nevertheless had the effect of positively boosting Anonymous’s public image. Portrayed as a band of brave underdogs willing to courageously pit themselves against the most dastardly evil scourges of the Western world—the Islamic terrorists—Anonymous was now firmly slotted in the “good” category. It was all wins—except, of course, for the negative side effect of convincing millions of Americans that Anonymous is interested in or capable of engaging in cyberwar, when in fact the operatives were mostly involved in a propaganda battle that involved identifying social media accounts and asking the responsible authorities to take them down.

During this wave of Anonymous-related media requests, my mind invariably gravitated to other aspects of the story. Even if Anonymous had dodged accusations of complicity, there were many other actors in the hacker world who could be singled out for scapegoating. For days I obsessively tracked the coverage of the Paris terrorist attacks, wondering whether computer encryption experts would be implicated by the suggestion that the terrorists were using cryptography to communicate, or if Edward Snowden, the NSA whistleblower, would be blamed for publicizing information that some pundit would suggest had given the terrorists an edge. Almost immediately both of these anticipated accusations surfaced—and more forcefully and absurdly than I had imagined. The implication that these attacks would not have happened without the public availability of sophisticated encryption technologies was so delusional it bordered on media psychosis. Yet without a shred of evidence a loud chorus of media outlets, including the major cable news networks and (most disappointingly) the *New York Times*, suggested just that: the terrorists had relied on encrypted communications to coordinate the attacks. (As it later turned out, the terrorists had sent unencrypted text messages.)<sup>27</sup> A smaller number of outfits, mostly cable news networks, also aired the deeply dubious claim proffered by a former director of the CIA, James Woolsey: “I think Snowden has blood on his hands from these killings in

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

1 France.”<sup>28</sup> A sentiment that should have simply been ignored was offered  
2 without even an attempt at substantiation.

3 During this period the media bubble I had happily inhabited for the past  
4 few years seemed suddenly to have been punctured. It was a stark reminder  
5 that the contemporary media field is so highly heterogeneous that, like Anon-  
6 ymous, it cannot be subject to any sweeping generalization. Contemporary  
7 reporting of such exceptional quality that some journalists have dubbed this  
8 period the golden age of journalism routinely appears today in the same  
9 newsfeeds as perhaps the most sloppy, lazy, sensationalist yellow journalism  
10 the world has ever known. As one proponent would have it, the journalistic  
11 present is cause for celebration: “In terms of journalism, of expression, of  
12 voice, of fine reporting and superb writing, of a range of news, thoughts,  
13 views, perspectives, and opinions about places, worlds, and phenomena that I  
14 wouldn’t otherwise have known about, there has never been an experimental  
15 moment like this.”<sup>29</sup> Yet even if this is the case, the mere availability of high-  
16 quality journalism does not guarantee its inclusion in the media diet of most  
17 consumers. The majority of Americans still imbibe most of their news from  
18 TV news sources, especially cable television,<sup>30</sup> far away from the epicenter of  
19 any journalistic golden age.

20 As the breathless sensationalism pumped into so many articles on the Paris  
21 attacks worked to temper my only recently discovered enthusiasm for the  
22 field of journalism, I felt a combination of shame, cynicism, and resignation.  
23 Perhaps all my media contributions of the past three years were in vain: So  
24 what if *Mother Jones* and the *Motherboard* got it right when CNN and ABC got  
25 it so wrong? In my sudden drive to track the breadth of the coverage, it was  
26 as if figures like Noam Chomsky and Bob McChesney—longtime critics of  
27 media consolidation and propagandizing—had suddenly paid me a visit, sat  
28 me down, and castigated me for generalizing my local, personal experiences  
29 to larger, broader societal trends.

30 Ultimately, however, I was pleased to see that I was not the only one who  
31 had these opinions. A number of journalists, some employed by mainstream  
32 news establishments, became sufficiently frustrated by the reporting to levy  
33 trenchant autocritiques. “If government surveillance expands after Paris, the  
34 media will be partly to blame,” proclaimed Brian Fung of the *Washington*  
35 *Post*. “In this case, the shootings have sparked a factually murky debate over  
36 what technology the terrorists used to communicate to each other and whether  
37 governments have enough power to monitor those channel[s].”<sup>31</sup> As could be  
38 expected, the great majority of journalists covering civil liberties, technology,

# PROOF

and national security were similarly incensed, and the resulting pieces and op-eds flagged the worst media offenders as they shredded the terrible reporting to pieces.

As the condemnation of erroneous reporting raged, I stumbled upon another survey that led me to once again reassess the contemporary state of journalism and a potential role outside experts could play in shaping the news for the better. If most Americans still receive their news from television news networks, a majority of them are also deeply skeptical of the accuracy and reliability of the information provided. According to a 2014 Gallup poll, “since 2007, the majority of Americans have had little or no trust in the mass media.” Those under fifty reported the least amount of trust, and 2014 represented “an all-time low” in general trustworthiness.<sup>32</sup> While this information might at first seem to be utterly negative—describing utmost cynicism in our media establishments—it might also be cause for cautious and circumscribed optimism, for this study suggests that the bulk of news viewers, aware of the shoddy quality of mainstream news, may be actively seeking alternatives. Therefore, under conditions of relentless mistrust, the dominance of the mainstream media is not inevitable.

The contemporary moment is best thought of not as a golden age but as an interregnum, an in-between, transitional state composed of competing forces and parties. For those of us who can fruitfully contribute in some capacity, for those who care about having the truth told, it is our responsibility to embolden and support the large number of outlets and journalists who are implementing higher standards in their reporting. Indeed the value of having ethnography go public lies not in our ability to comment generally as might, say, a technology pundit, but in the “circumscribed as well as more qualified” nature of our knowledge and expertise as academics, to borrow phrasing from Didier Fassin.<sup>33</sup>

Still anthropologists face a particular set of challenges when entering the journalistic arena due to substantial differences in how these two professions treat their sources and how they view the very nature of knowledge production. If publicity might harm a source, an anthropologist usually proceeds in one of two ways: creating composite characters to protect subjects or simply forgoing publishing the material. These conventions, deployed fairly commonly, are meant to uphold a long-standing norm in operation among anthropologists, also ratified in the American Anthropological Association’s Principles of Professional Responsibility, adopted in 1971. The first principle stipulates, “Anthropologists’ paramount responsibility is to those we study.”<sup>34</sup>

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38



1 Increasingly we are expected to do even more than prevent harm and are  
2 obliged to contribute something to the communities we study during or after  
3 our research.<sup>35</sup>

4 Journalists' allegiance, however, tends not to lie with their sources but  
5 with the public, formulated in terms of the public interest. The media scholar  
6 Isabel Awad, who has thoughtfully laid out the major differences in the ethi-  
7 cal treatment of sources between journalists and anthropologists, observes  
8 that in "journalism . . . 'ethical quality' is a matter of *getting it right* rather  
9 than treating the sources in the right way. The profession's take on ethics . . . is  
10 fundamentally related to the motto of 'the public's right to know'; the prevalence  
11 of a narrow definition of truth in terms of facticity. In brief, it is an ethics  
12 constrained by the ideology of objectivity . . . consequently, a manipulative  
13 relationship with [a] source is as commonsensical to the profession as the  
14 paradigm of objectivity."<sup>36</sup> While my experience has been that most journal-  
15 ists rely on guile sparingly and as a last resort—after all, it is counterproduc-  
16 tive to repeatedly burn or manipulate your sources—nevertheless the mere  
17 idea that a source can be instrumentalized in the service of a higher purpose  
18 points to a major point of contention between the two fields of endeavor.

19 As a close corollary, journalists may interpret as pernicious the proximity  
20 and intimacy of the sort cultural anthropologists strive to achieve during the  
21 course of their research, as a corrosive force that seems to run counter to  
22 the imperative of objectivity that so thoroughly defines their craft. Although  
23 the status of objectivity in journalism has long been under debate, it remains  
24 foundational for a huge swath of contemporary journalism.<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps un-  
25 avoidable, then, that when such an endeavor meets cultural anthropology—a  
26 discipline whose practitioners tend to be hypercommitted to empirical  
27 research but who are skeptical of knowledge purporting to be neutral and  
28 objective—there is bound to be misunderstanding and confusion about  
29 what we do. Journalists at times see anthropologists like myself as biased or  
30 complicit, while anthropologists see this as a misperception symptomatic of  
31 the way journalists and other publics can "confuse empathy with sympathy,  
32 understanding with promotion, and engagement with contamination," as the  
33 anthropologist Tom Boellstorff has aptly put it.<sup>38</sup>

34 This gulf of understanding helps to explain why a number of journalists  
35 who reviewed my book on Anonymous aligned in pointing to my "bias"—  
36 even journalists who otherwise stamped the book with a seal of approval.  
37 Never mind that I had been upfront about my methodology and reasons.  
38

# PROOF

(Had I purported to be neutral, this might have been a different story.) It was frustrating—and tedious—to read indictments of proximity brandished over and over again, especially since it was that very intimacy that was of benefit to many journalists when they sought my advice.

My motivation to write a popular account of Anonymous also far exceeded a mere desire to make Anonymous intellectually sensible—although that was certainly a goal. I also sought to embolden the field of activism itself. Even though Anonymous is not perfect (far from it), a far greater political risk looms today from those who avoid imperfect activism in favor of doing nothing or approach political life through discourse alone: political inaction masquerading as democratic process, attached to the naïve belief that publicity alone can spark meaningful political change.<sup>39</sup> Even at its best, informed by thoughtful academic research and expertise, a politics of deliberation, whether taking the form of journalistic publication or citizen commentary on social media, is obviously limited in its capacity to spur political awareness, much less lead to meaningful societal change.

Nevertheless political activists do read the news. Political organizing without publicity—without hard-hitting journalism—would not get very far. It is undeniable that we would be worse off without the presence of an aggressive, honest, and ruthlessly investigative and critical field of journalism. There is a reason so many of us, from academics to journalists—most notably otherwise concerned citizens themselves—passionately decry the media when they fail to live up to basic standards. It is the same reason we are elated that change may be on the horizon when an outfit like the *Washington Post* finally publishes a story on the high levels of lead in Flint, Michigan’s drinking water. And also why so many advocates and activists, past and present, have targeted the media as a site for radical reform, initiating a slew of alternative endeavors that have without a doubt shifted the contemporary journalism sphere in positive ways.<sup>40</sup>

My experience has led me to believe that journalists do their best work when they devote themselves to specialization in a certain area or are willing to rely on those who have dedicated themselves to a field of study. A mixture of the two is better yet. And, ideally, when they do tap those experts they might listen to what they have to say instead of stubbornly (or cynically) moving forward on false premises—whether out of an inflated belief in their own judgment or out of a cynical belief that all that matters is delivering an entertaining or sensational story. As for the persistent confusions and

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

1           misconceptions regarding the nature of anthropological research, it is up to  
2           us to change minds and better relate our own intentions. And there is prob-  
3           ably no better way to do this than direct experience and engagement—the  
4           anthropological imperative—with the journalist communities concerned to  
5           begin the process.

---

## 8           Notes

- 9
- 10          1    Anonymous 2015.
- 11          2    See Fassin (2013) on the difference between popularization and politicization in  
12          public anthropology.
- 13          3    I would like to thank Ben Wiezner, who encouraged me to drop “social movement”  
14          to describe Anonymous for these reasons.
- 15          4    Coleman 2010, 2012; Coleman and Ralph 2011. Many of the problematic journal-  
16          istic pieces are cited in the blog and op-ed critiques. In *Hacker Hoaxer Whistle-*  
17          *blower Spy* (2015: 155–56) I also address the early journalistic quest to locate the  
18          single leader.
- 19          5    Helmreich 1998; Juris 2008; Scheper-Hughes 1995.
- 20          6    Ingold 2014: 383.
- 21          7    *On the Media* 2011.
- 22          8    See Geismar (2015) for a thoughtful discussion of my role as a trickster in both my  
23          dealings with Anonymous and my book’s writing style.
- 24          9    Van Meijl 2005: 9.
- 25          10   See Coleman (2015: 173–76) for a discussion of the diverse composition of Anony-  
26          mous: while the hackers were exclusively male, a number were people of color  
27          and came from more diverse class backgrounds as well. Among the nontechnical  
28          participants—the great majority of Anons—the diversity is even more apparent  
29          and includes gender, sexuality, class, profession, and national diversity. Since par-  
30          ticipants are cloaked and since Anonymous’s ideology is ill defined, it scrambles the  
31          human tendency to seek and find like-minded people.
- 32          11   Pangburn 2011.
- 33          12   Wood 2012. The Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act  
34          (PIPA), two copyright and internet regulation laws proposed by the US Congress,  
35          were shelved after a massive wave of internet-based protest against them in 2012.
- 36          13   Bazelon 2014; Knafo 2012; Reitman 2012.
- 37          14   See Kushner 2013, 2014.
- 38          15   Carr 2013; Horne 2015; Humphreys 2014; Reitman 2012; Zaitchik 2013.
- 16   To be sure, some of these pieces, especially the two in *Rolling Stone*, were called out  
            for some inaccuracies and problematic representation; nevertheless they are quite  
            sympathetic and generally accurate. In contrast, as far as I saw, Anonymous advo-  
            cates universally praised the piece by Adrian Humphreys in the *National Post*,