

Gopher, Translator, and Trickster: The Ethnographer and the Media

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(Forthcoming in *If Truth be Told*. Dider Fassin. ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Please do not cite or distribute without permission)

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 counter-cultural digital activists known as Anonymous launched operation #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 besmirched by obscurantism and mysticism. 'Charlie Hebdo,' historical figure of satirical journalism has been targeted" (Anonymous 2015).

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 with 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 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 soundbite).

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 American national networks contacted me by email, and it wasn't long before we connected on the phone. Like so many other journalists laboring under a looming deadline, he cut right to the chase—asking me to connect him to a participant of the collective willing to speak that evening on their national news telecast. The request, while difficult to fulfill, was not unusual; by that time I had introduced Anonymous participants to journalists at least a couple of dozen times.

Instead, what was exceptional was his stubborn insistence on which particular Anonymous participant he would like to interview: he sought "the Julian Assange figure of Anonymous." Stunned by this ill-informed solicitation (the vast majority of journalists had at least studied up enough to learn that Anonymous was premised on an ideal of leaderlessness, or were at least more aware of the gaps in their knowledge), I first had to muzzle my laughter before transitioning into a role I once occupied fairly often: that of a cultural translator/ambassador. I offered a version of the following explanation: Because Anonymous eschews leadership, I explained, there is no "Julian Assange figure." I hammered deeper into this point, drawing from years of anthropological research. Participants are so quick to ostracize leaders or fame seekers, I continued, that it has not only prevented the development of an official leader, but even the emergence of a spokesperson is rare. While many Anons respect Julian Assange—and have supported him and his causes—there is no equivalent

Assange figure in Anonymous. I finished by telling him that while Anons have appeared on TV before, it took some measure of work to earn their trust, so it was not likely that I or he could convince someone to agree to an interview in a single day.

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

The wake of this exchange provided an ideal moment to reflect on my many years of interactions with journalists—an incidental byproduct of my multi-year anthropological study of Anonymous, which culminated in a popular ethnography on the topic published with a trade press. This case was striking for being anomalous; after my brief exchange with the reporter, I recall thinking that he was the single most clueless, uninformed journalist I had ever spoken to, but thankfully he had become the exception. That day, it dawned on me that just as my view of Anonymous changed by being in the trenches with them, so too did my views on journalists shift after clocking so many hours with these professionals. Fieldwork, which at first centered almost exclusively on interactions with activists, very quickly came to also involve a near constant engagement with the journalistic field: over a roughly five-year period, I was interviewed by over 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 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 also had myself become deeply entangled with the fourth estate.

In what follows, I recount the distinct roles I adopted during my countless interactions with journalists. Most often taking the roles of a translator and gopher, eventually a prolific broker, and on occasion as a trickster, I occupied these positions for multiple reasons that shifted over time. Initially, I used my access to media outlets as a commodity that enabled me to trade my own personal access for the promise of publicity to the attention-hungry Anonymous activists I was studying. Eventually, the task of shaping popular understandings of Anonymous via the media became more interesting as a political end in itself. And, ultimately as I wrote my book, I saw journalism as indispensable for publicizing the plights of Anonymous activists, especially hackers, rounded up by the state (see Fassin 2013 on the difference between popularization and politicization in public anthropology). I conclude by reflecting on why the contemporary moment is especially ideal for experts to engage with journalistic publics.

My Ethnographer's Magic

As sketched above, my involvement with journalism was an entirely coincidental byproduct of my primary field of academic study. Doves of journalists sought me out not because I was technology pundit or public figure, but rather because I was one of the few experts researching Anonymous—a confusing and tricky political phenomenon to describe, at least in any straightforward or compact

fashion. At this point, with years of activity under their belt, there are a few definitive things that can be said about Anonymous. While increasingly recognizable as advocates for social justice and stewards of disruption and direct action—employing, as they have, a recognizable roster of tools and tactics (including freezing websites, doxing, hacking, leaking, Twitter storms) across various “ops”—Anonymous is nevertheless whimsical, making it impossible to predict its next steps. Because participants refuse to establish an ideological or political common denominator, Anonymous is not best thought of as a traditional social movement—for no matter how internally diverse such movements always are, for instance exhibiting radical and moderate wings and a diversity of tactics, they still tend to be oriented toward a single issue or cause, like fighting for the environment or civil rights.¹ Anonymous is far more plastic. It functions as an improper name—Marco Deseriis’s term—which is a naming alias anyone can take hold of for whatever purpose (2015). Anonymous, in specific, combines a general idea—that anyone can be anonymous—along with a set of tactics and iconography by which different groups have coalesced to take action. In the last five years the great majority of Anonymous interventions have been geared toward concrete political and many progressive causes: their support role in the various movements such as Occupy Wall Street and those that constituted the Arab Spring; the commitment to domestic social justice issues seen in engagements against rape culture and police brutality; many of the hacks, at the hands of now jailed hacktivists like Jeremy Hammond, for instance, were meant to expose the shadowy world of intelligence or security firms. But when journalists first reached out to me in 2010, Anonymous was far more baffling and I happened to be one of the few people who had spent time with participants and publicly ventured any conclusions on the subject. This only intensified as my perceptions and interpretations of Anonymous evolved in even step with its ability to generate increasingly prominent and newsworthy activity.

My research on Anonymous commenced in January 2008. It was the month when Anonymous first targeted the Church of Scientology—an intervention that began as a fierce pranking endeavor but then morphed, quite surprisingly, into a long-standing protest campaign named Project Chanology. Prior to this campaign, the name Anonymous had been used almost exclusively for sometimes devilish and gruesome, sometimes playful and jocular hijinks. Between then and 2010, my research on Anonymous could be described as a part-time curiosity rather than a full-blown ethnographic study. After a dramatic surge of politically-motivated direct action activity among Anons, in December 2010 I switched to full-time fieldwork research.

The blizzard of Anonymous activity began soon after WikiLeaks published a cache of classified US diplomatic cables, a move which prompted the American government to target WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and pressure companies like Amazon and Paypal to halt the processing of all services to his organization. The AnonOps node of Anonymous, angered by this act of censorship, rallied in support of WikiLeaks. Keeping with an Anonymous tradition, in early December 2010 they launched a multi-day barrage of distributed denial of service (DDoS) campaign against every company they identified as having caved to US government pressure (a DDoS attack momentarily disables access to a website by clogging the targeted website with more data requests than it can handle).

After this op, Anonymous never let up, demonstrating an incredible run of activism between 2011 and 2013. For instance, Anonymous dramatically and assiduously intervened in every single of the 2011 revolts that so exceptionally captured the public imagination: In solidarity with the Tunisian people, Anonymous hacked their government’s websites; the Spanish indignados beamed Anonymous’s signature icon, the Guy Fawkes mask, on the facade of a building in the Plaza del Sol;

and after playing a crucial role by disseminating the earliest calls to occupy Wall Street, Anonymous further developed its propaganda techniques in service to Occupy as the movement territorialized more and more bodies in the streets.

Back in December 2010, in the midst of its initial surge of direct action activity, I installed myself in nearly a dozen of the Anonymous chat channels that then proliferated on IRC, and rarely logged off from any of them in the next two years. In contrast to WikiLeaks—a constituted entity with clear objectives—journalists were understandably perplexed by Anonymous’s origins, motives, and organizational styles. Even as I began to tease out cultural and ethical logics, throughout most of winter 2011 I still found Anonymous deeply bewildering; while it was clear that many participants were galvanized into action in order to expose corruption and remedy injustices, many of their activities seemed to stem rather directly from a rowdy and often offensive culture of humor. Furthermore, even as I gained access to many Anons and witnessed some operations in the making, I also became increasingly aware of an inaccessible underworld where sometimes-illegal activity was hatched; while I began to recognize that Anonymous had settled into a few predictable patterns, it was also clear that mutability and dynamism are core features of its social metabolism and development. It was difficult to forecast when or why Anonymous would strike, when a new node would appear, whether a campaign would be successful, or how Anonymous might change direction or tactics during the course of an operation.

With the exception of technology journalists capable of finding Anonymous for themselves, the great majority of reporters in 2010 and much of 2011 knew so little about the collective—and so little about the basic functioning of the internet technologies it relied on—that they imagined participants to be entirely beyond reach, as if they were deliberately hiding away in the digital equivalent of an Internet black hole. Almost immediately I dispelled the myth of Anonymous’s incognito status and did so by acting as a gopher. It was really only a question of logging on to their chat services, I explained time and again to countless journalists. I taught the willing, roughly a couple dozen journalists, how to use Internet Relay Chat—a text-based communication platform invented in 1988 and popular among hackers of all stripes for communication—so they could, like me, spend hours of their day chatting to participants directly (generally those who took my advice were far too busy with the daily grind of deadlines to spend as much time as I did on the IRC channels).

Although far less common today, the idea that Anonymous is out of reach still occasionally crops up among non-technologically oriented journalists covering them for the first time. Take for example a July 2015 request from a Washington-based reporter specializing in Canada-US relations. After Anonymous leaked classified Canadian government documents that revealed the existence of twenty-five spying stations located around the world, he sent me an upbeat electronic missive, “You might imagine how I might find some of this Anonymous stuff about CSE [Canadian Security Establishment] spying in the U.S. incredibly intriguing. If only Anonymous had a 1-800 media hotline!” As I had done so many times before, I replied that they do have something similar to a hotline—but it comes in the form of a series of chat channels devoted not only to internal organization but also media inquiries and communications. I passed along the information he would need to seek participants out.

Indeed, this “hotline”—the variegated network of Anonymous IRC servers and channels—acted as my home base throughout these years of intense fieldwork study. One of the most bustling IRC servers at the time, hosted by AnonOps, even maintained a channel named #reporter, dedicated to communications with the press. As I did my research, I witnessed journalists conduct dozens of interviews with participants, especially those reporters willing to do so in public (most were

unwilling to conduct public group interviews for fear of being scooped). Some of these early journalists had found their own way onto IRC. But it was, and remains, gratifying to teach the ones that reach out to me for technical assistance—not only so they can interact with Anonymous themselves, but also to watch them discover that portions of the so-called “dark web” are far more accessible (and less creepy and sinister) than many had initially imagined.

While the gophering was often enjoyable, nearly everything else about my early media interactions felt more like a chore and ultimately, a losing battle. It was particularly discouraging to see the way that from the beginning many journalists, even those working for reputable outfits, were publishing pieces that flattened out the complexities of Anonymous and their tactics by confining them into a straitjacket of well-worn stereotypes. Even as Anonymous insisted there was no formalized and especially single point of leadership—an insistence that my research bears out—a handful of these early journalists, especially in the UK and US, became obsessed with identifying the *single* mastermind or leader pulling the Anonymous strings. Another common distortion concerned Anonymous’s composition. Some journalists declared with certainty that Anonymous was composed primarily of juvenile, white, male hackers. At the time, this struck me as particularly reckless and anti-empirical—as thus far no participants had been arrested and unveiled. Given the painfully obvious—Anonymous intentionally obfuscated itself via technical anonymity—these declarations could only be based on conjecture and ingrained assumptions about the type of person who the journalist assumed would be attracted to this style of activism (granted, at times the style of talk employed by some Anonymous participants could appear quite juvenile—but this was more an artifact of the group’s subcultural trolling origins than a reflection of the individuals behind the keyboards; upon arrests, it was clear that though some of the participants were young white hackers, many were neither young nor white). Another predilection common to this early period of journalistic writing was a refusal to entertain the notion that Anons were driven by any activist sensibility, instead slanting reporting to emphasize sinister, criminal, or chaotic elements. Finally, one commonly used tactic by Anonymous, the DDoS campaign, was repeatedly misrepresented by journalists as a species of hacking—when the truth is its deployment requires only the most rudimentary computer knowledge, and its use constitutes the equivalent of accessing a public webpage rapidly and in succession—a far cry from computer intrusion, much less data destruction that sometimes follows from *bona fide* hacking.

I became so exasperated by these early representations that I penned two critical blog entries—published by Savage Minds (Coleman 2010) and Social Text (Coleman and Ralph 2011)—and one op-ed (Coleman 2012) with the sole purpose of picking apart and debunking the most problematic media representations of Anonymous then floating about.³ Yet, even as I sought to demolish these representations, I distinctly remember *expecting* no less of the media. The continual deployment of these misconceptions simply reinforced some of the most negative conceptions and ingrained assumptions I held about the journalistic endeavor writ large.

Walking A Fence/Walking on Eggshells

In spite of being annoyed by these media representations and believing there was not a thing I could do to prevent them, much less change them, I nevertheless resolved to continue interacting with journalists; my initial labor of gophering and cultural translation was simply too beneficial, aiding me in two interrelated and essential ways. The first was to enable the “participant” component of the participant-observation method, the *sine qua non* of anthropological research. While anthropologists can be more or less involved, and more or less

sympathetic toward their subject area—some identify with their subjects unconditionally, even militantly (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Juris 2008) while others are more distant and critical in their analysis (Helmreich 1998)—it is nonetheless routine that most of us embed ourselves deeply and participate in some capacity within the domain of study. This type of entanglement is driven partly by mundane practicalities. It is, after all, very hard to be present not for months but for years within a collective body of people without either feeling the desire to do something useful or simply being put to work.

But, more than that, it is also a sacred anthropological mantra that knowledge should be shored up directly through the wellsprings of experience. “More than any other discipline in the human sciences,” Tim Ingold has noted in a tract on the distinctiveness of anthropological fieldwork, “[anthropology] has the means and the determination to show how knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others” (2014). Given Anonymous’s serious penchant for law breaking, I wanted to steer clear from doing anything straight up illegal or that could be construed as illicit; since a hefty portion of the entities’ energy was dedicated toward making propaganda—as they call it themselves—and interacting with journalists on their chat channels, contributing to their own native media efforts seemed like an ideal—and especially safe—way to participate in Anonymous.

The second reason to forge forward with my media work was of a more selfish sort—and also came to exceed my role as a participant within Anonymous: as my facilitation led to more and more appearances in media, many participants came to see me as useful. Undoubtedly this was a crucial component in my ongoing access, justifying my presence to those skeptical of my position and lending me increased proximity to deliberative processes. And as I transitioned from gopher to academic source and media commentator, it became evident that the respect only grew—especially following those occasions where I succeeded in publicly demolishing a particularly noxious or persistent myth. The following compliment, bestowed on me in July 2011 after I was interviewed on television by PBS, was typical of the Anonymous reactions I received in this period: “I’m far more impressed that you actually understood the essence of anon and were able to articulate it far better than anyone else I’ve seen on TV media thus far.”

But even as my media presence served to enable research, it also felt insanely precarious, as if I was walking on eggshells. During those early months of research, when so much remained hidden from me by intent or my own bewilderment, it was rather hard to authenticate information (once I was entrusted with leaked logs, or accessed court documents, which included chat conversations, I was able to verify many of the statements offered during internet or face-to-face interviews). I remained acutely aware that if I tendered a statement that was ever revealed to be spectacularly false, my public reputation could be irrevocably tarnished. So I tended to stick to a narrower band of information I felt certain of standing by. But this did not eliminate my anxiety about being misquoted by a journalist, or lessen my fears regarding my own inability to boil down complex ideas into the pithy statements so often required in news genres. When journalists asked some hard-hitting, difficult-to-answer questions, as Bob Garfield from the NPR show *On the Media* did on March 4, 2011, there was a tiny window of response time to be precise and on point:

BOB GARFIELD: We were talking about individuals under the banner of Anonymous creating mischief. What happens if, for example, a country engaging in cyber warfare decides to do so masquerading as Anonymous?

GABRIELLA COLEMAN: While anyone can take the name, people who are familiar with Anonymous, which includes journalists, people like me, other interested parties, could come about and say, look, this may be

Anonymous but it did not spring forth from the networks whereby Anonymous is currently organizing themselves. And so you can sort of respond in the media and say, well, it is, but in name alone.²

My primary worry, especially during the first six months of active research, was losing Anonymous's respect by saying something that drew its ire. Many Anons then and now actively seek media attention to further their causes. They also care about their portrayal. Aware that participants were critically assessing—even dissecting—every statement I made (and still are), I was ruthlessly deliberate during *every* single interview I conducted in those first six months. It was not that I felt fully muzzled, cowered into silence (in fact, I could be very blunt about a class of issues—for instance, I contested early on the pervasive idea that they operated as an unthinking swarm, instead emphasizing the importance of transitional styles of leadership and, especially, the role of close-knit teams). Nor was I afraid of being hacked or attacked by Anonymous if I said something off-putting to them; by that time the collective had explicitly professed its commitment to a free press by refusing to target and attack journalists and media commentators, even those they vehemently disagreed with, a rule they generally followed. But still I did not feel reassured by the existence of this norm. Concerned foremost about losing access, I was always excruciatingly mindful of how and when to make public statements.

Indeed, I exercised such restraint, delicacy, and caution during those early interviews that one could almost describe my position as one of trickery or cunning. Most often this stance came from attempts to be diplomatic when commenting on a sensitive issue. In other instances, it manifested as a careful effort not to comment at all—largely because of my own knowledge on a given subject was too patchy and incomplete to benefit anyone. In other instances, I withheld information as I could not control the narrative or was not afforded the space to tell a fuller story. This is the situation I found myself in on March 2012, when *Fox News* published the bombshell news, previously unbeknown to me, that one of the most charismatic and prominent hackers in Anonymous, Sabu, had been forcibly assigned on behalf of the FBI to shadow Anonymous around the clock, working as a government informant for nine months. As the news ricocheted across social media and especially on the Anonymous IRC channels, no one from Anonymous knew I had met Sabu on a handful of occasions in person in New York City. Meanwhile I had confided this sensitive information to a few friends and a couple of journalists. One of them, a *New York Times* journalist, writing a story about Sabu after the *Fox News* stories had been published, made a valiant attempt to coax a comment out of me about his life and personality (days later when I wrote her without this personal nugget, instead offering an apology and asking if I was too late, she responded “Yes, the beast was hungry Thursday”). I also had a window to write an op-ed for a prominent news outlet, discussing the implications of his deceit from a personal vantage point. As tempting as these opportunities were, I remained silent on the matter for a very long time. A minuscule quote in a brief article could hardly provide the full context of my meetings with Sabu. Even an op-ed could not afford the space I felt was needed. The semi-secret remained mine for a year and a half, until I could recount the whole story in my book.

My craftiness in those days took one final and pleasurable form. Although I was the only professor hanging out with Anonymous on chat channels—at least knowingly the only one doing research, as there were a couple present in their free time as participants—I was far from the only outsider. A handful of journalists had taken to covering Anonymous so frequently, and with such perceptiveness, that they had come to occupy a position similar to mine: that of a trusted outsider. Mutually beneficial, the relationship between outsiders and insiders was built on unstated understanding. Anonymous would provide a bit of extra access and we would transmit messages they

could not always do on their own or by themselves. For the most part, hoaxing was rare: Anonymous activists wanting their pet causes and issues covered in the news were largely forthcoming in their dealings with us—but as a confederacy of outsiders, we also maintained an acute awareness that we could be manipulated if we were not careful. Some of us outsiders became close confidantes, even friends. Not only was it a relief to discover other, empathetic human outlets for complaining about Anonymous—only to be expected with a difficult arena to study and maneuver—but we also relied on each other to verify information and share warnings about shady characters. For instance, one core Anonymous participant loved to boast about his manipulation skills. He regularly told me how easy it was for him to social engineer (hacker jargon for straight up human manipulation) some of the reporters. It became clear that this confession itself was part of a higher order social engineering he was working on me—designed to make me feel like I was part of the club. As exhausting as it was, I played along—working his confidence right back, even as his conniving shenanigans became a frequent subject of discussion, alongside many other topics, among us outsiders.

Ultimately, these small, routine, required deceptions added up until I realized that I myself had become a trickster—one of the master tropes I use to frame Anonymous in my book.⁴ This conniving spirit became apparent in the way I handled myself on all matters related to Anonymous during the first year of research: interactions with participants, public lectures, and interviews with journalists. Yet I thought it curious that this craftiness emerged not merely as an extension of its integral role in the community under study—a collective in many ways defined by their occasional spinning webs of guile and subterfuge. Rather, tricksterism can be considered as a fundamental attribute of anthropological research itself, precisely because we are “invariably caught between the dimensions of involvement and detachment,” as Toon van Meijil (2005: 9) has put it. With multiple masters—our subjects; the scholarly community; and also, for some of us, the public at large—anthropologists hold multiple allegiances, far more, it seems, than journalists. We must be adept in the art of code shifting as we traverse boundaries and craft our writing to speak to multiple audiences.

Thus, public anthropology—especially when it involves being public at the very start of research—introduces some particularly thorny situations that I had not expected. For me, the most difficult aspect of my media work was having to speak authoritatively during the early stages of research, before patterns, much less conclusions became evident. Commenting about Anonymous, already a perplexing entity, felt premature but also, due to the general gulf of public understanding, somehow necessary: Just one more example of the myriad complexities which defined this period. Either Anonymous could be described by those without any first-hand experience interacting with the collective (and there are plenty of technology pundits happy to do so), or it could be described by me—someone who had at least been around long enough to have an inkling of what made this phenomenon special, and how they might function without a single leader, or any of the other tropes so fervently initially sought by journalists in the quest to provide their readers with easy understandings. What my engagement with Anonymous and journalists demanded of me above all else was a willingness to be at ease with some degree of uncertainty regarding my area of study.

From Trickster to Broker and Media Maker

Even if in retrospect it remains impossible for me to identify the exact date, my relationships to both Anonymous and the journalists covering it were drastically transformed for the better sometime late in 2012. My interactions with reporters ceased to feel hostile, and instead began to take on a more collaborative character. I had become more media savvy, able to forecast and take control of most

situations, especially interviews. In many cases this was facilitated by a shift in the journalists themselves—many of whom had been paying attention and asked sophisticated, sound, and probing questions. Increasingly, my exchanges with journalists became rewarding experiences in their own right, and I came to admire many aspects of the craft—most especially journalists’ ability to transmit complex ideas in accessible and lively language. My brokering activity became quite common: I routinely and quite openly advised reporters on who they should trust and who should be avoided within Anonymous, cleared up any persistent falsehoods, helped facilitate dozens of exchanges and interviews, and even began to contact journalists proactively about stories they might be interested in pursuing—something which I continue to do today.

Even my trickery and caution exercised when proffering public statements about Anonymous waned. By establishing firmer relationships with participants and by harvesting more and more knowledge about the collective, I could make definitive statements without fear of making a major mistake or angering them. Coming to know many Anonymous activists at a personal level certainly helped; for instance, during interviews or public talks I came armed with the ammunition needed to firmly and confidently contest the pesky and still rather tenacious myth, held by the media and the public alike, that Anonymous is primarily composed of white male juvenile hackers.⁵ As my relationship with Anonymous also became more secure, it enabled me to grow more frank in both my on-the-record and off-the-record interviews. Take, for instance, an interview in November 2011 where I openly discuss that Anonymous may be manipulating me:

There are things about Anonymous that I currently can't write about because I don't understand it well enough. You have to have some discretion because there are some backroom politics, and they need time to develop before you make a claim about it. I'm aware that I am operating within webs of duplicity. While I've come to trust certain Anons and have more empathy than less, I'm also well aware that duplicity is the name of the game—misinformation and social engineering—and I'm being caught up in it myself. But, if it was clear cut and transparent, it wouldn't be as effective politically. (Coleman in Panburn 2011.)

To be sure, on occasion there still emerged articles that struck me as problematic, but I generally found myself tearing apart pieces less frequently. The nature of the reporting had shifted, and generally for the better. It was rare, for instance after 2012 for journalists to identify the leader of Anonymous, well aware that a multiplicity of individuals and groups—some at war with each other—made use of the collective alias; nevertheless, journalists still sometimes resorted to grossly sensationalist accounts. For instance, on January 19, 2012, after Anonymous mounted a colossal DDoS campaign against the copyright industry following the take down of the popular file storage site, MegaUpload and the arrest of its owner, internet hacker and entrepreneur Kim Dotcom, a journalist working for the respected online technology news website CNET, Molly Wood, wrote a piece about the campaign that could just have easily been published on the parody website *The Onion* for how it equates DDoS with nuclear war. The piece opens: “With #OpMegaUpload, Anonymous launches the equivalent of thermonuclear cyber war,” and continues: “In the aftermath of Wednesday’s SOPA/PIPA blackout protests, the Internet community amassed quite a bit of goodwill, flexed its muscles in a friendly, humorous, civil-disobedience kind of way, and, remarkably, even managed to change quite a few minds. Just 24 short hours later, Anonymous legions nuked that goodwill and took cyber security into thermonuclear territory” (Wood 2012). Readers unaware of how a DDoS works might encounter such an article and come away from it with the deeply dubious notion that a large scale DDoS attack constitutes one of the most destructive forces online or off.

Journalists of this period also continued to routinely assess Anonymous on distinctly ethical

terms—some pieces were neutral, many still titled toward more negative assessments, and a smaller minority were without qualification positive—but the sort of ridiculous distortions like the one reflected in the CNET piece had indeed become rarer, or at least increasingly isolated to the tabloid press, especially in Britain. Starting in late 2011, outlets like the *Huffington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times Magazine* increasingly began to publish about Anonymous in longer form pieces that exhibited nuance and precision (Knafo 2012; Reitman 2012, Bazelon 2014). Journalists tasked with these writings were afforded the time—in some cases up to six months—and generous word counts they needed to assemble pieces that addressed sociological factors, accommodated varying perspectives, and told fuller and more dynamic stories. (The exception was a couple of longer form stories, all written by the same author, that puffed up and overstated the role of single individuals, which quite understandably drew Anonymous’s fury; after all, Anonymous campaigns are collective efforts and any individual self-promotion is universally loathed⁶). Many shorter articles described Anonymous on far more accurate terms as well. I was quite pleased, for instance, when a journalist working for one of the most reputable journalistic outfits contacted me in 2012 to ask whether the following definition of Anonymous, which he wanted to include in their style guide, was accurate: “Anonymous: An amorphous movement of online activists and other web rebels who periodically coalesce around a cause or campaign. Although some within Anonymous are skilled computer users, many are not. Avoid the terms ‘hackers’ or ‘hacking movement’ when describing the movement as a whole.”

The stakes of journalistic reporting only became clearer to me as law enforcement arrested increasing numbers of Anonymous activists. From late 2011 to 2012, arrests intensified—a period I dubbed “the nerd scare” in my book. Yet even as I occupied the position of being one of the world’s experts on Anonymous, there was next to nothing I could do to meaningfully publicize the difficult plights of these Anonymous activists as the arrests unfolded; the impact of a couple of op-eds about state crackdowns could only be fleeting, reaching a limited one-time audience. Journalists, however, could inform the wider public about this crescendo of arrests, and also offer the interpretations of their significance.

They had the ability to reach millions of citizens—but only if they chose to cover these crackdowns at all. A small cadre of journalists would, to be sure, write about the arrests and trials in specialized, niche publications covering technology news, such as *Wired* and *Ars Technica*. But their appearance—and perhaps more significantly, characterization—remained more uncertain in the broader-reaching national North American papers. I even deliberated whether it was better for them to ignore the issue and avoid the potential for negative characterizations. After all, pejorative associations have long been used to tar and feather hackers.

As it turned out journalists covered in great detail the plights of a trio of arrested and eventually convicted Anons: Barrett Brown, Jeremy Hammond, and Matt DeHart (the coverage did not extend infinitely, however, as others who spent time in prison such as John Anthony Borrell and Higinio Ochoa III received barely any press). A portion of this coverage came in longer form pieces, appeared in prominent mainstream outfits, such as *Newsweek* and the *Guardian* in the UK/US and the *National Post* in Canada, and was sympathetic or neutral in tone (Carr 2013; Horne 2015; Reitman 2012, Humphreys 2014; Zaitchik 2013). Most significantly, these articles paint these Anonymous actors as activists working on behalf of a political and social movement, and never resorted to crass demonization of either their actions or the movement at large.⁷ I deemed it vital to contribute to this effort that drew attention to the injustices inherent to the American prosecutorial system and the dubious legislation, the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, designed to target hackers, and so in 2012 I

assumed the role of broker and collaborator with more frequency and intensity. It was in this period, for instance, that I learned how to pitch stories—and even succeeded in landing one on the front cover of a major American national newspaper. I encouraged participants and their relatives, who were initially and understandably reluctant to share stories with journalists (concerned as they were of losing control of their narrative), to engage with journalists and offered tangible advice on who to trust and how to proceed. I wrote a handful of op-eds and I also continued to pour increasing amounts of time into behind-the-scenes work with investigative journalists, providing background information, and brokering further contact between Anonymous and journalists. For a couple of pieces, I poured in over a dozen hours helping journalists get up to speed with Anonymous’s history and confusing organizational dynamics. I connected them to Anonymous participants and ex-participants whose knowledge about specific operations were essential to their reportage. It became clear that some journalists were not only receptive to advice from specialists, but this sort of collaboration with outside experts was an essential component of the investigative process.

By the end of 2012, prolific engagement with so many different journalists from so many different publishing outfits—*MotherJones*, *BBC*, *Wired*, *CBC*, *PBS*, *Macleans*, *Time*, *Al Jazeera*, *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Yorker*, *Vice/MotherBoard*, *Huffington Post*, *Ars Technica*, and a dozen others—meant I could no longer cling to my earlier facile perceptions of some singularly oriented, unitary sphere called “the media.” While my exchanges with journalists were not carried out for scholarly purposes, I had effectively spent so many hours with these professionals that I couldn’t help but observe journalism from an ethnographic perch. Direct experience forced me to approach the field of endeavor with more nuance, and I began to differentiate between styles of journalism and specialized arenas while also making assessments on a yet more granular level, based on the integrity and corpus of specific individuals.

In fact, I began to perceive this domain much in the same way I saw Anonymous: not as some monolith that was good or bad, but as a multi-layered, complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory venture. Anonymous participants are fond of declaring that “Anonymous is not unanimous,” and, of course, the very same thing could and should be said about the field of journalism. If my past dissatisfaction with journalists was premised on the way so many of them in 2011 fell back on generalizations and stereotypes, it became apparent that it was rather hypocritical for me to do the same to them.

Even if my views of journalists shifted, what could be said more generally about the impact of my media input and output? Did my counsel, commentary, and public writing contribute to sculpting a positive, public image of Anonymous as a politically minded collective that should be taken seriously, or that is understood to possess a legitimate agenda? These questions are harder to answer, given how notoriously difficult it can be to ascertain something as diffuse as “public opinion” in relation to Anonymous, especially in absence of a large scale sociological survey on the topic. Even harder to gage is my own role in shaping public perceptions of Anonymous. Still, what can be said with some degree of confidence is that with a handful of exceptions, the great majority of articles that relied on my feedback were generally accurate—even if, again, ethical assessments veered in distinct, at times opposing, directions.

But obviously many pieces were written without my (or any expert’s) input. Initial findings based on a comprehensive analysis of two hundred media articles on Anonymous establish that the majority of pieces published between 2012 and 2013 in one way or another minimized or at least questioned the legitimacy of Anonymous activism: typically, by framing their operations as pranksterism, vigilantism, or cyber-threats (Klein 2015). The very general strokes of the study strike

as sound, although follow-up research could be more nuanced and concise. After all, some media outlets are more influential than others. Nor does the study adequately distinguish between short pieces and long form investigative articles—the latter of which tend to carry more weight (Ettema and Glasser 1998). Perhaps most significantly, the piece ignores the immense power of entertainment and pop culture representations to shape the political life of ideas (Duncombe 2007). When assessing the influence of Anonymous, it is especially vital to include an analysis of popular films, graphic novels, and television series, such as *Mr. Robot* and *Who am I*, which have increasingly integrated explicit and implicit references, many of them quite positive, to hacktivism in general, and Anonymous in particular.⁸

Downplaying the legitimacy of Anonymous can also be understood as part and parcel of a much longer trend in American journalism to ignore or marginalize radical political interventions altogether (Gitlin 2003; Downing 2000). Given this context, what may be most remarkable is that journalists even chose to write on Anonymous so extensively in the first place (the reasons compelling so many reporters to write about Anonymous could be the subject of another article). If we compare the coverage Anonymous receives to say radical animal rights activism, which is, to be sure, featured in specialty news outlets catering to these issues, but otherwise is generally ignored by mainstream journalists, Anonymous stands out for the ample coverage it has received in the last five years.

It is also critically relevant (and a relief) that journalists rarely framed Anonymous as cyber-terrorists. Indeed, one of the most vigorous attempts to suture Anonymous to extremism failed (Coleman 2014). Had this connection been successfully forged, the entire movement could have been discredited in one fell swoop. Still, the possibility that government officials could, under the right conditions, paint Anonymous as cyber-extremists always struck me (and still does) as a real threat. Elsewhere I have theorized why it is that Anonymous managed to escape the clutches of cyber-terror and warfare imaginary—a story that is too complex to recount here (Coleman 2015).⁹ But suffice to say, given the political misuse of terrorism rhetoric (Stampnitzky 2014), especially in the context of the environmental movement (Potter 2011) and the sheer pervasiveness of cyber-warfare rhetoric, it was conceivable that state actors or law enforcement could, given adequately ambiguous conditions, have successfully folded Anonymous under this rubric. And had they done so, it is likely some mainstream media outfits would have likely followed by parroting and thus potentiating this dubious message.

Conclusion: A Double Reality Check

On November 13, 2015, terrorists struck again in Paris. This time it was even more brutal and grim than the Hebdos attacks; ISIS operatives gunned down scores of people who were enjoying an evening out. In the aftermath, Anonymous issued a declaration of “war” against ISIS. It wasn’t the first time. For ten months prior, some Anons had been fighting back against the organization under the guise of OpIsla. But it prompted those involved with the op to redouble their efforts, and an Italian wing of Anonymous to initiate a distinct endeavor, fittingly dubbed OpParis. Both ops aimed to monkey wrench the well-oiled ISIS online propaganda machine by taking down websites, flagging social media sites for removal and, in rarer instances, gathering intelligence and channeling it directly to Western law enforcement.

A number of long-time Anonymous participants were thrown into an ethical tizzy over these two operations and the media attention they triggered. The largest Anonymous Twitter account, *Your Anonymous News*, posted a denunciation: “We think it’s great if people want to hack ISIS and publish their secrets. But engaging in social media censorship campaigns and dealing with intelligence

contractors and government agents is deeply stupid. The former will contribute to legitimizing the spread of internet censorship and will lead to the increased censorship for everyone, including Anonymous.”¹⁰ A respected Anonymous hacker, blackplans, decried the moment in a tweet as a “media cheerleading frenzy.”¹¹

Yet even as the Anonymous offensive against ISIS was distinguishing itself as one of the most internally unpopular Anonymous operations to date, the mainstream media bubbled over with giddy enthusiasm about the entity’s supposedly new direction. Some variation of the headline, “Anonymous at cyberwar with ISIS,” crowned dozens of articles. As had been the case in previous instances where an Anonymous operation involved an anti-terrorist mandate, cable news networks were not only quick to report, but were, in fact, so quick to report that participants in OpParis had yet to even do anything beyond releasing a video.

It wasn’t long before I was drowning in media requests. Keeping with recent tradition, the lion’s share of the media professionals who approached me arrived well stocked with enough basic knowledge about the workings and logic of Anonymous to ask intelligent questions of me and modulate their subsequent queries. Yet, once again, the journalistic exception reared its head: this time in the form of a producer for an American cable news network. Shortly after we began to chat, she revealed her desire to feature the “leader” of Anonymous on her evening news show. Fortunately, she proved less arrogant than the journalist described in this article’s opening passage. Admitting her ignorance, she adjusted her expectations after I politely explained why this was impossible. (Nevertheless, in instances like these I can never help but wonder whether under different circumstances—like if I was a 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 talking head.)

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 cyber war 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. Anonymous, portrayed in these stories as a band of brave underdogs willing to courageously pit themselves against the most dastardly evil scourges of the Western world—the Islamic terrorists—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 or capable of engaging in “cyberwar,” when in actual fact the operatives were mostly involved in a propaganda battle which 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 I feared 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 Edward Snowden, the NSA whistleblower, would be blamed for publicizing information that some pundit might suggest had given the terrorists an edge. Almost immediately, both these anticipated accusations surfaced—and more forcefully and absurdly than I had even 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 sent unencrypted text messages (Bode 2015). A smaller number of outfits, mostly cable news networks, also aired the deeply dubious claim proffered by CIA ex-director James Woolsey: “I think Snowden has blood on his hands from these killings in France.” A sentiment that should have simply been ignored, offered as it was without even an attempt at substantiation.

During this period, the media bubble I had happily inhabited for the last few years seemed suddenly to have been punctured. It was a stark reminder that the contemporary media field is so highly heterogeneous that, like Anonymous, it cannot be subject to any sweeping generalization. Contemporary reporting of such exceptional quality that some journalists have dubbed this period the “golden age of journalism” routinely appears today in the same newsfeeds as the most sloppy, lazy, sensationalist, yellow journalism the world has perhaps ever known. As one proponent would have it, the journalistic present is cause for celebration: “In terms of journalism, of expression, of voice, of fine reporting and superb writing, of a range of news, thoughts, views, perspectives, and opinions about places, worlds, and phenomena that I wouldn’t otherwise have known about, there has never been an experimental moment like this” (Engelhardt 2014). Yet even if this is the case, the mere availability of high-quality journalism does not guarantee its inclusion in the media diet of most consumers. The majority of Americans still imbibe most of their news from TV news sources, especially cable television,¹² far away from the epicenter of any journalistic golden age.

As the breathless sensationalism pumped into so many articles on the Paris attacks worked to temper my only recently discovered enthusiasm for the field of journalism, I felt a combination of shame, cynicism, and resignation. All my media contributions of the last three years, I felt, were perhaps accomplished in vain: So what if Mother Jones and the Motherboard got it right when CNN or ABC got it so wrong? In my sudden drive to track the breadth of the coverage, it was as if figures like Noam Chomsky and Bob McChensey—long time critics of media consolidation and propagandizing—had suddenly paid me a visit, sat me down, and castigated me for generalizing my local, personal experiences to larger, broader societal trends.

Ultimately however, I was pleased to see that I was not the only one who had these opinions. A number of journalists, some employed by mainstream news establishments, became themselves sufficiently frustrated by the reporting to levy trenchant auto-critiques: “If government surveillance expands after Paris, the media will be partly to blame,” proclaimed Brian Fung of the *Washington Post*. “In this case, the shootings have sparked a factually murky debate over what technology the terrorists used to communicate to each other and whether governments have enough powers to monitor those channel[s]” (2015). As could be expected, the great majority of journalists covering civil liberties, technology, 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 re-assess the contemporary state of journalism and a potential role outside experts like myself 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 information provided by these very mainstream channels. According to a 2014 Gallop 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 trustfulness.¹³ And while this information might at first seem to be an utterly negative state of affairs—utmost cynicism in our media establishments—it might also be cause for very cautious and circumscribed

optimism; what this study suggests is a bulk of news viewers may be keenly aware of the shoddy quality of mainstream news, and instead be actively seeking alternatives. Under conditions of relentless mistrust, the dominance of the mainstream media is not inevitable.

The contemporary moment is best not thought of 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 be 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, say a technology pundit might, but in the “circumscribed as well as more qualified” nature of our knowledge and expertise as academics, to borrow a phrasing from Didier Fassin (2013: 23).

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: they create composite characters to protect subjects, or simply forgo publishing material altogether. These conventions, deployed fairly commonly, are meant to uphold a long-standing norm in operation among anthropologists, also ratified in the American Association of Professional Anthropologists’ “Principles of Professional Responsibility” adopted in 1971. Its first principle stipulates: “anthropologists paramount responsibility is to those we study.”¹⁴ Increasingly we are expected to do even more than prevent harm, and are obliged to contribute something back to the communities we study during or after our research (see especially Rutherford 2012 for an excellent discussion of these expectations of obligatory entanglement).

Journalists’ allegiance, on the other hand, tends not to lie with their sources but with the public, formulated in terms of the public interest. Media scholar Isabel Awad who has thoughtfully laid out the major differences in the ethical treatment of sources between journalists and anthropologists, observes: [in] “journalism ... ‘ethical quality’ is a matter of *getting it right* rather than treating the sources in the right way. The profession’s take on ethics ... is fundamentally related to the motto of ‘the public’s right to know’; the prevalence of a narrow definition of truth in terms of facticity. In brief, it is an ethics constrained by the ideology of objectivity ... consequently, a manipulative relationship with sources is as commonsensical to the profession as the paradigm of objectivity.” (While my experience has been that most journalists rely on guile sparingly as a last resort (it is after all counterproductive to repeatedly burn or manipulate your sources) nevertheless, the mere idea that a source can be instrumentalized in the service of a higher purpose points to a major point of contention between the two fields of endeavor.

As a close corollary, close proximity and intimacy of the sort that cultural anthropologists strive to achieve during the course of their research can be understood by journalists as pernicious—a corrosive force that seems to run counter to the imperative towards objectivity that so thoroughly defines their craft. Although the status of objectivity in journalism has long been under debate, it remains foundational for a huge swath of contemporary journalism (Shudson 1981). It is perhaps unavoidable then that when such an endeavor meets cultural anthropology—a discipline whose practitioners tend to be hyper-committed to empirical research but are skeptical of knowledge purporting to be neutral and objective—there is bound to be misunderstandings and confusions about what we do. Journalists at times see anthropologists like myself as biased or complicit, while anthropologists see this as a misunderstanding symptomatic of the way that journalists and other publics can “confuse empathy with sympathy, understanding with promotion, and engagement with

contamination,” as anthropologist Tom Boellstorff has aptly put it (2015).

This gulf of understanding helps to explain why a number of journalists who reviewed my book on *Anonymous* aligned in pointing to my “bias”—even journalists who otherwise stamped the book with a seal of approval. Never mind that I had been upfront about my methodology and reasons rather clearly (Had I purported to be neutral, this might have been a different story). It was frustrating—and tedious—to read indictments of proximity and closeness brandished over and over again, especially since it was that very intimacy that was of benefit to many journalists when they sought my advice in the first place.

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 if *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 a democratic process, attached to the naïve belief that publicity alone can spark meaningful political change (Barney 2013). 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 why so many of us, from academics, to journalists—and most notably also otherwise concerned citizens themselves—passionately decry the media when they fail to live up to basic standards. It is the same reason why, when an outfit like the *Washington Post* finally gets around to publish a searing story about the high levels of lead in Flint Michigan’s drinking water, we are elated that change may be on the horizon. 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 (Wolfson 2014; Pickard 2014).

My experience with hundreds of journalists has led me to believe that these professionals do their best work when they devote themselves to specialization in a certain area, or are willing to rely on other experts 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 inflated belief in their own faculties of judgment, or a cynical belief that all that matters is delivering an entertaining or sensational story. As for the still persistent confusions and misconceptions regarding the nature of anthropological research, it seems up to us to change minds or better relate our own intentions. And there is probably no better way to do this than direct experience and engagement—the anthropological imperative—with the journalist communities concerned to jump start the process.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Ben Wiezner who encouraged me to drop the language of social movement to describe *Anonymous* for these reasons.
2. Many of the problematic journalistic pieces are cited in the blog and op-ed critiques. In *Hacker*

Hoaxer Whistleblower Spy (2015: 155–156), I also address the early journalistic quest to locate the single leader.

3. <http://www.onthemedial.org/story/133097-the-many-moods-of-anonymous/transcript/>
4. See Geismar 2015 for a thoughtful discussion of my role as a trickster in both my dealings with Anonymous and my book's writing style.
5. See Coleman (2015: 173–176) for a discussion of the diverse composition of Anonymous: while the hackers were exclusively male, a number were people of color and came from more diverse class backgrounds as well. Among the non-technical participants—the great majority of Anons—the diversity is even more apparent and includes gender, sexuality, class, profession, and national diversity. Since participants are cloaked and since Anonymous's ideology is ill defined, it scrambles the human tendency to seek and find people like-minded people.
6. See Kushner 2013 and 2014.
7. To be sure, some of these pieces, most especially the two *Rolling Stone* pieces were called out for some inaccuracies and problematic representation but nevertheless, they are quite sympathetic and generally accurate. In contrast, Anonymous advocates as far as I saw, universally praised the piece by Adrian Humphreys in the *National Post*, which was exceptional in its accuracy and depth—it totaled 15,000 words and was published in four parts. It was also awarded the silver award for best article granted by the Canadian Online Publishing Awards.
8. See, for instance, the television series *House of Cards* whose technical consultant for the show was Gregg Housh, an ex-Anonymous participant; the comic book *Hactivist* (2014), which was inspired in part by all the hacktivist interventions of 2011; and the German Hollywood film released by Sony Pictures, *Whoami* (2014) which explicitly references an affiliated Anonymous group, Lulzsec.
9. While Anonymous has until now managed to avoid framing as cyber-extremists, it nevertheless may become harder to dodge this designation in the future. The cyber-warfare pump has been so primed and for so long, that all it will take is one major hacking attack on infrastructure to potentially demonize the entire field of direct action hacktivism. And while there is no evidence that progressive hacktivists want to target critical systems, these systems are vulnerable to attack. The American government spends far more money propagating fear-mongering machines and surveillance apparatuses than they do investing money in securing critical infrastructure (Masco 2014). Since the forensics of hacking attribution is a notoriously difficult and politically malleable science, it is also conceivable that any attack on infrastructure could be pinned to hacktivists even in absence of credible information (Rid and Buchanan 2014: 4).
10. https://twitter.com/YourAnonNews/status/676111595009925122?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
11. <https://twitter.com/blackplans/status/667368507357528065>
12. According to a 2013 Pew Study on the new habits of Americans, “[c]able news handily wins the competition for the time and attention of news consumers at home” See <http://www.journalism.org/2013/10/11/how-americans-get-tv-news-at-home/>
13. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/185927/americans-trust-media-remains-historical-low.aspx>
14. <http://www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1656>

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