If Truth Be Told

The Politics of

Public Ethnography

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Gopher, Translator, and Trickster

The Ethnographer and the Media

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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."[1] 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

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 in the collective willing to speak that evening on the 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. What was exceptional was his stubborn insistence on the particular Anonymous participant he wanted to interview: "the Julian Assange figure of Anonymous." Stunned by this ill-informed solicitation (the vast majority of journalists had studied 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 had once occupied fairly often, that of a cultural translator and ambassador. I offered a version of the following explanation: because Anonymous eschews leadership 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 and fame seekers, I continued, that it has prevented the development of an official leader, and even the emergence of a spokesperson is rare. While many Anons respect 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 by attempting 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 out Anonymous 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.

The wake of this exchange provided an ideal moment to reflect on my many years of interactions with journalists, an incidental byproduct of my multiyear anthropological study of Anonymous, which culminated in a popular ethnography on the topic published by a trade press. This case was striking 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 around 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.[2] I conclude by reflecting on why the contemporary moment is especially ideal for experts to engage with journalistic publics.

My Ethnographer's Magic

My involvement with journalism was an entirely coincidental byproduct of my primary field of academic study. Droves of journalists sought me out not because I was a technology pundit or public figure but 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, after years of activity, 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 a recognizable roster of tools and tactics (including freezing websites, doxing,

hacking, leaking, publishing coordinated Twitter alerts) 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, such as fighting for the environment or civil rights.[3] Anonymous is far more plastic. It functions as an improper name—Marco Deseriis's term—which is an alias anyone can deploy for whatever purpose. Anonymous, in specific, combines a general idea—that anyone can be anonymous—along with a set of tactics and iconography around which different groups around the globe have coalesced to take action.[4] In the past five years the majority of Anonymous interventions have been geared toward concrete political and progressive causes, for example, their role in supporting the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements; their commitment to domestic social justice issues, seen in engagements against rape culture and police brutality; and their exposure of the shadowy world of intelligence and 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 step with its ability to generate increasingly prominent and newsworthy activities.

My research on Anonymous commenced in January 2008. It was the month when participants 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 attacks, 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 U.S. diplomatic cables, a move that prompted the U.S. government to target the WikiLeaks founder 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. In keeping with an Anonymous tradition, in early December 2010 they launched a multiday distributed denial of service (DDoS) campaign against every company they identified as having caved to U.S. 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, it dramatically and assiduously intervened in each of the 2011 revolts that so intrigued the public: 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 façade 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 attracted more and more people to join its encampments.

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 any of them in the next two years. In contrast to their knowledge of WikiLeaks—a constituted entity with clear objectives—journalists were understandably perplexed by Anonymous's origins, motives, and organizational style. Even as I began to tease out its cultural and ethical logics, throughout most of the winter of 2011 I found Anonymous deeply bewildering; while it was clear that many participants were galvanized to act 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, 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 also was 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, and 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 the participants

were entirely beyond reach, as if they were deliberately hiding in the digital equivalent of a 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. I taught the willing, 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 too could spend hours of their day chatting to participants directly. (Generally those who took my advice were far too busy with 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 it for the first time. Take, for example, a July 2015 request from a Washington-based reporter specializing in Canada-U.S. 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!" I replied that they do have something similar to a hotline, but it is in the form of a series of chat channels devoted to internal organization as well as media inquiries and communications. I passed along the information he would need to seek out participants.

This "hotline"—the variegated network of Anonymous IRC servers and channels—acted as my home base throughout these years of intense fieldwork. 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 who reach out for technical assistance so they can interact with Anonymous themselves. (I also enjoyed watching 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 that, from the beginning, many journalists, even those working for reputable outfits, were publishing pieces that flattened out the complexities of Anonymous and its tactics by confining it in a straitjacket of well-worn stereotypes. Even as Anonymous insisted there was no formalized single point of leadership—a point my research bears out—a handful of these early journalists, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, became obsessed with identifying the mastermind or leader pulling the Anonymous strings. Another common distortion concerned Anonymous's composition. Some journalists declared with certainty that it was composed primarily of juvenile, white, male hackers. At the time this struck me as particularly reckless and anti-empirical, as no participants had yet been arrested and unveiled. Given the painfully obvious—Anonymous intentionally obfuscated itself via technical anonymity—these declarations could be based only on conjecture and ingrained assumptions about the type of person 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 entity'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, journalists repeatedly misrepresented the DDoS campaign as a species of hacking; the truth is its deployment requires only the most rudimentary computer knowledge, and its use is the equivalent of accessing a public web page rapidly and in succession—a far cry from computer intrusion, much less data destruction that sometimes follows bona fide hacking.

I became so exasperated by these early representations that I wrote two critical blog entries and one op-ed with the sole purpose of picking apart and debunking the most problematic media representations of Anonymous then floating about.[5] Yet even as I sought to demolish these representations, I expected no less of the media. The continual deployment of these misconceptions simply reinforced some of the most negative views 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 resolved to continue interacting with journalists; my initial labor of gophering and

cultural translation was simply too beneficial, aiding me in two interrelated 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 with and more or less sympathetic toward their subjects—some identify with their subjects unconditionally, even militantly, while others are more distant and critical in their analysis[6]—it is routine to 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 for years in a group 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 from the wellspring of experience. "More than any other discipline in the human sciences," Tim Ingold notes 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."[7] Given Anonymous's serious penchant for breaking the law, I wanted to steer clear of anything straight-up illegal or that could be construed as such; since a hefty portion of the entity's energy was dedicated to making propaganda—as they themselves call it—and interacting with journalists on their chat channels, contributing to their own media efforts seemed like an ideal and safe way to participate in Anonymous.

The second reason to forge ahead with my media work was more selfish—and also exceeded my role as a participant within Anonymous. As my facilitation led to more and more appearances in the 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 giving me increased proximity to deliberative processes. As I transitioned from gopher to academic source and media commentator, it became evident that the respect only grew—especially following those occasions when 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 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 facilitated my research, it also felt insanely precarious, as if I were walking on eggshells. During those early months of research, when so much remained hidden from me, whether intentionally or because of 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 and face-to-face interviews.) I remained acutely aware that if I tendered a statement that was revealed to be false, my public reputation could be irrevocably tarnished. So I tended to stick to a narrower band of information whose veracity I felt certain of. 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 by news organizations. When journalists asked hard-hitting, difficult-to-answer questions, as Bob Garfield did on the NPR show *On the Media*, there was a brief window of response time in which to be precise and on point:

B.G.   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?

G.C.   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.[8]

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 actively seek media attention to further their cause. They also care about their portrayal. Aware that they were critically assessing—even dissecting—every statement I made (and they still are), I was ruthlessly deliberate during every interview I conducted in those first six months. It was not that I felt muzzled or cowed into silence. (In fact I could be very blunt about a class of issues; for instance, I contested early on the pervasive idea that Anons 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 Anons 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 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. Most

concerned 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 behavior at the time as 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 yet other instances I withheld information when 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 in March 2012, when *Fox News* published the news, previously unbeknown to me, that one of the most charismatic and prominent hackers in Anonymous, Sabu, had been working as a government informant for nine months, forcibly assigned by the FBI to shadow the collective around the clock. 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 broadcast, made a valiant attempt to coax a comment out of me about Sabu's 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 of opportunity 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 needed. The semisecret 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 ostensibly 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 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 participants could not always send 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 empathetic human outlets for complaining about Anonymous—which was only to be expected in an arena difficult 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 "manipulate") 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 I was part of the club. As exhausting as it was, I played along, working his confidence right back, even as his 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.[9] This conniving spirit became apparent in the way I handled myself on all matters related to Anonymous during my first year of research in 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 its occasionally spinning webs of guile and subterfuge. Rather tricksterism can be considered a fundamental attribute of anthropological research itself precisely because we are "invariably caught between the dimensions of involvement and detachment," as Toon van Meijl has put it.[10] 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 do. 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—introduced some particularly thorny situations that I had not expected. 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 that defined this period. Either Anonymous could be described by those without any firsthand 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 it might function without a single leader, or any of the other tropes so fervently sought by journalists in the quest to provide their readers with easy understanding. 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 with 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 them became rewarding experiences in their own right, and I came to admire many aspects of their craft, especially their ability to transmit complex ideas in accessible and lively language. My brokering activity became quite common: I routinely and quite openly advised reporters 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, which I continue to do today.

Even my trickery and caution 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 participants. Coming to know many Anonymous activists on a personal level certainly helped; for instance, during interviews and public talks I came

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.[11] As my relationship with Anonymous also became more secure, it enabled me to be more frank in both on-the-record and off-the-record interviews. Take, for instance, an interview in November 2011, where I openly suggested 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 back-room 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.[12]

To be sure, on occasion I still read 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. For instance after 2012 it was rare for journalists to identify a leader of Anonymous, well aware that a multiplicity of individuals and groups—some at war with each other—made use of the collective alias. However, journalists still sometimes resorted to grossly sensationalist accounts. For instance, in January 2012 Anonymous mounted a colossal DDoS campaign against the copyright industry following the takedown of the popular file storage site MegaUpload and the arrest of its owner, an Internet hacker and entrepreneur named Kim Dotcom. Afterward Molly Wood, a journalist working for the respected online technology news website CNET, wrote a piece about the campaign that could have been published on the parody website *The Onion* for how it equates DDoS with nuclear war. Wood begins, "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 twenty-four short hours later, Anonymous legions nuked that goodwill and took cyber security into thermonuclear territory."[13] Readers unaware of how a DDoS attack works might come away from such an article

with the deeply dubious notion that a large-scale DDoS attack is 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 tilted toward more negative assessments, and a minority were positive without qualification—but the sort of ridiculous distortions like the one reflected in the CNET piece had become rare, or at least increasingly isolated to the tabloid press, especially in Britain. In late 2011 outlets like the *Huffington Post, Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times Magazine* increasingly began to publish longer pieces about Anonymous that exhibited nuance and precision.[14] Journalists tasked with covering Anonymous were afforded the time—in some cases up to six months—and the generous word count they needed to address sociological factors, accommodate varying perspectives, and tell fuller and more dynamic stories. (The exceptions were a couple of longer 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 loathed.)[15] Many shorter articles described Anonymous more accurately 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 became clearer to me when law enforcement officers began arresting increasing numbers of Anonymous activists. From late 2011 to 2012 arrests intensified—a period I dubbed "the nerd scare" in my book. Yet even though I was one of the world's experts on Anonymous, there was next to nothing I could do to meaningfully publicize the difficult plight of these Anonymous activists; 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 interpret 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 write about the arrests and trials in specialized, niche publications covering tech-

nology news, such as *Wired* and *Ars Technica*. But their appearance—and, perhaps more significant, their characterization of the events—remained more uncertain in the national North American papers with large circulations. I even deliberated whether it was better for them to ignore the story 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 arrests and eventual convictions of a trio of 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 Borell and Higinio O. Ochoa III, received barely any press.) A portion of this coverage came in longer pieces, appeared in prominent mainstream sources, such as *Newsweek* in the United States, the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom, and the *National Post* in Canada, and was sympathetic or neutral in tone. Most significant, these articles paint these Anons as activists working on behalf of a political and social movement and never resort to crass demonizations of either their actions or the movement at large.[16] I deemed it vital to contribute to this effort that drew attention to the injustices inherent in the U.S. prosecutorial system and the dubious legislation, the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, designed to target hackers. So in 2012 I assumed the roles of broker and collaborator with more frequency and intensity. It was in this period that I learned how to pitch stories and even succeeded in landing one on the front cover of a major national U.S. newspaper. I encouraged participants and their relatives who were initially and understandably reluctant to share stories with journalists (concerned as they were with losing control of their narrative) and offered advice on who to trust and how to proceed. I wrote a handful of op-eds and spent more time in behind-the-scenes work with investigative journalists, providing background information, and brokering contacts between Anonymous and journalists. For a couple of pieces I put in over a dozen hours explaining to journalists Anonymous's history and confusing organizational dynamics. I connected them to Anonymous participants and former participants whose knowledge about specific operations was essential to their reporting. It became clear that some journalists were receptive to advice from specialists and that collaboration with outside experts was an essential component of the investigative process.

By the end of 2012 my engagement with so many journalists from so many publishing outfits—*Mother Jones*, BBC, *Wired*, CBC, PBS, *Maclean's*, *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 a singularly oriented, unitary sphere called "the media." I had 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 with more nuance, and I began to differentiate among 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 a monolith that was good or bad but as a multilayered, complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory venture. Anonymous participants are fond of declaring "Anonymous is not unanimous," and of course the same 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 hypocritical of 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 writings contribute to sculpting a positive public image of Anonymous as a politically minded collective that should be taken seriously, that possesses 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 the absence of a large-scale sociological survey on the topic. Even harder to gauge 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.

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 its operations as pranksterism, vigilantism, or cyber threats.[17] The very general strokes of the study appear 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 investigative articles, the latter of which tend to carry more weight.[18] Perhaps most significant, the survey ignores the immense power of entertainment and pop culture representations to shape the political life of ideas.[19] 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 integrated explicit and implicit references, many of them quite positive, to hacktivism in general, and Anonymous in particular.[20]

Downplaying the legitimacy of Anonymous can also be understood as part and parcel of a much longer trend in American journalism to altogether ignore or marginalize radical political interventions.[21] Given this context, what may be most remarkable is that journalists chose to write on Anonymous so extensively at all. (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 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 past five years.

It is also critically relevant (and a relief) that journalists rarely framed Anonymous as cyberterrorists. Indeed one of the most vigorous attempts to suture Anonymous to extremism failed.[22] Had this connection been successfully forged, the entire movement could have been discredited. Still the possibility that under the right conditions government officials could paint Anonymous as cyber extremists has always struck me as a real threat. Elsewhere I have theorized why Anonymous managed to escape the clutches of cyberterror and warfare imaginary, a story that is too complex to recount here.[23] Given the political misuse of terrorism rhetoric, especially in the context of the environmental movement, the sheer pervasiveness of cyber warfare rhetoric, and under ambiguous conditions, suffice it to say that it is conceivable state actors or law enforcement could have successfully placed Anonymous within this rubric.[24] Had they done so it is likely that some mainstream media outfits would have followed by parroting and thus potentiating this dubious message.

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

issued a declaration of war against ISIS. It wasn't the first time; ten months earlier some Anons had begun fighting back against the organization under the guise of OpIsis. 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 longtime 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 legitimize the spread of internet censorship and will lead to the increased censorship for everyone, including Anonymous."[25] A respected Anonymous hacker, blackplans, decried the moment in a tweet as a "media cheerleading frenzy."[26]

Yet even as the Anonymous offensive against ISIS was distinguishing itself as one of the most internally unpopular operations to date, the mainstream media bubbled over with giddiness 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 antiterrorist mandate, cable news networks were quick to report—so quick in fact that participants in OpParis had yet to do anything beyond releasing a video.

It wasn't long before I was drowning in media requests. Keeping with recent tradition, most 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 and modulate their subsequent queries. Yet, once again, the journalistic exception reared its head, this time in the form of a producer for a U.S. 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 I described earlier. Admitting her ignorance, she adjusted her expectations after I politely explained why this was impossible. (Nevertheless in instances like these I wonder whether under different circumstances—say, if I were 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.)

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.)[27] 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

France."[28] A sentiment that should have simply been ignored was offered without even an attempt at substantiation.

During this period the media bubble I had happily inhabited for the past 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 perhaps the most sloppy, lazy, sensationalist yellow journalism the world has 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."[29] 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,[30] 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. Perhaps all my media contributions of the past three years were in vain: So what if *Mother Jones* and the *Motherboard* got it right when CNN and 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 McChesney—longtime 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 sufficiently frustrated by the reporting to levy trenchant autocritiques. "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 power to monitor those channel[s]."[31] 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 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.[32] 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.[33]

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."[34]

Increasingly we are expected to do even more than prevent harm and are obliged to contribute something to the communities we study during or after our research.[35]

Journalists' allegiance, however, tends not to lie with their sources but with the public, formulated in terms of the public interest. The media scholar Isabel Awad, who has thoughtfully laid out the major differences in the ethical treatment of sources between journalists and anthropologists, observes that 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 [a] source is as commonsensical to the profession as the paradigm of objectivity."[36] While my experience has been that most journalists rely on guile sparingly and as a last resort—after all, it is 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, journalists may interpret as pernicious the proximity and intimacy of the sort that cultural anthropologists strive to achieve during the course of their research, as a corrosive force that seems to run counter to the imperative of 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.[37] It is perhaps unavoidable, then, that when such an endeavor meets cultural anthropology—a discipline whose practitioners tend to be hypercommitted to empirical research but who are skeptical of knowledge purporting to be neutral and objective—there is bound to be misunderstanding and confusion about what we do. Journalists at times see anthropologists like myself as biased or complicit, while anthropologists see this as a misperception symptomatic of the way journalists and other publics can "confuse empathy with sympathy, understanding with promotion, and engagement with contamination," as the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff has aptly put it.[38]

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.

(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.[39] 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 this is 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.[40]

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

misconceptions regarding the nature of anthropological research, it is up to us to change minds and 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 begin the process.

Notes

1   Anonymous 2015.
2   See Fassin (2013) on the difference between popularization and politicization in public anthropology.
3   I would like to thank Ben Wizner, who encouraged me to drop "social movement" to describe Anonymous for these reasons.
4   Deseriis 2015.
5   Coleman 2010, 2012; Coleman and Ralph 2011. Many of the problematic journalistic pieces are cited in the blog and op-ed critiques. In *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistle-blower, Spy* (2015: 155–56) I also address the early journalistic quest to locate the single leader.
6   Helmreich 1998; Juris 2008; Scheper-Hughes 1995.
7   Ingold 2014: 383.
8   *On the Media* 2011.
9   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.
10 Van Meijl 2005: 9.
11 See Coleman (2015: 173–76) 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 nontechnical 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 like-minded people.
12 Pangburn 2011.
13 Wood 2012. The Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA), two copyright and internet regulation laws proposed by the US Congress, were shelved after a massive wave of internet-based protest against them in 2012.
14 Bazelon 2014; Knafo 2012; Reitman 2012.
15 See Kushner 2013, 2014.
16 Carr 2013; Horne 2015; Humphreys 2014; Reitman 2012; Zaitchik 2013. 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 advocates 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 also won the silver award for best article, granted by the Canadian Online Publishing Awards.
17 Klein 2015.
18 Ettema and Glasser 1998.
19 Duncombe 2007.
20 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 *Hacktivist* (2014), which was inspired in part by all the hacktivist interventions of 2011; and the German Hollywood film released by Sony Pictures, *Who Am I* (2014), which explicitly references an affiliated Anonymous group, Lulzsec.
21 Downing 2000; Gitlin 2003.
22 Coleman 2015.
23 Coleman 2016. While Anonymous has until now managed to avoid being framed as cyber extremists it may become harder to dodge this designation in the future. The cyber warfare pump has been so primed 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 U.S. government spends far more money propagating fear-mongering machines and surveillance apparatuses than investing 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 the absence of credible information (Rid and Buchanan 2014: 4).
24 Potter 2011; Stampnitzky 2014.
25 This Anonymous Twitter feed is available at https://twitter.com/YourAnonNews/status/676111595009925122?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.
26 https://twitter.com/blackplans/status/667368507357528065. No longer available.
27 Bode 2015.
28 Nakashima and Miller 2015.
29 Engelhardt 2014.
30 According to a 2013 Pew Study on the new habits of Americans, "cable news handily wins the competition for the time and attention of news consumers at home" (Olmstead et al. 2013).
31 Fung 2015.
32 See Riffkin 2015.
33 Fassin 2013: 23.
34 American Anthropological Association (1971) 1986.
35 See Rutherford (2012) for an excellent discussion of these expectations of obligatory entanglement.
36 Awad 2006: 935.
37 Shudson 1981.

38 Boellstorff 2015.
39 Barney 2013.
40 Pickard 2014; Wolfson 2014.

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What Is a Public Intervention?

Speaking Truth to the Oppressed

GHASSAN HAGE

In early 2013 I was invited by the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of Interna-
tional Studies at Birzeit University in Ramallah to deliver a keynote address
for a conference titled "Between Dependence and Independence: What Future
for Palestine?" As my writings and public activism and interventions clearly
show, Palestine is not just a marginal academic or intellectual space to me. I
have carefully examined the way the Arab diaspora experiences Palestine, and
I have analyzed various features of Zionism as a colonial settler movement
from a comparative perspective. Last but not least, I am interested in thinking
through ways of ending the conflict and have written and made a number of
public interventions on the subject. All in all I invest a lot of political affect in
the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and think of the struggle for the decoloniza-
tion of Israeli-Palestinian relations as one of the, if not *the*, defining political
struggles of our time. I am prepared to accept that giving so much centrality
to this conflict has something to do with my own background; some of those
who know that I grew up in a very anti-Palestinian and pro-Israeli Maronite
Lebanese family have even hinted that my Palestinian interests have com-
pensatory dimensions. Nonetheless I think this centrality and global perva-
siveness is far beyond the particularity of my experience. While all localized
political conflicts have a global existence, as I explain later, no conflict exists
as a global reality the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does, and in my work
I have always seen myself as an anthropologist of the conflict in its global
dimension. I have applied for and obtained research grants specifically to
analyze this question. I do not have a total empirical sense of something
as enormous as a global reality, any more than an anthropologist has a total