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# The Collective Identity of Anonymous

## Web of Meanings in a Digitally Enabled Movement

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### **Abstract**

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The present dissertation explores the collective identity of the Anonymous movement. This movement is characterised by the heterogeneity of its activities, from meme-crafting to pranks to activist actions, with a wide range of goals and tactics. Such heterogeneity raises the question as to why such a diverse group of people makes the decision to act under the same name. To answer this question, the concept of collective identity is applied, which describes how participants collectively construct the definition of their group.

This dissertation is based on a three-year ethnography. The main findings show that the collective identity of Anonymous rests on five sets of self-defining concepts related to: 1) Anonymous' counterculture of offense and parrhesia, 2) its personification into two personae (the 'trickster' and the 'hero') that have differing goals, means, and relationships with the environment, 3) a horizontal organisation and a democratic decision-making process, 4) practices of anonymity and an ethics of self-effacement, and 5) its self-definition as a universal entity, inclusive, and unbounded. The collective identity construction process is marked by tensions due to the incompatibility of some of these concepts, but also due to differences between these collective identity definitions and actual practices. As a consequence, they have to be constantly reaffirmed through social actions and discourses.

Not all individuals who reclaim themselves as Anonymous recognise the totality of these collective identity definitions, but they all accept a number of them that are sufficient to legitimate their own belonging to the movement, and most of the time to be recognised by others as such. The different groups constituting Anonymous are therefore symbolically linked through a web of collective identity definitions rather than an encompassing and unified collective identity. This 'connective identity' gives the movement a heterogeneous composition while at the same time permitting it to retain a sense of identity that explains the use of a collective name.

*Keywords:* Anonymous; collective identity; social movements

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*To my supervisor Dr. Jakob Svensson,  
without whom the present dissertation  
would not be.*

*To my friend Adrien Malderez.  
May your smile never be forgotten.*



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# Abbreviations

CI: collective identity  
CICD: collective identity cognitive definition  
DDoS attack: distributed denial of service attack  
DESM: digitally-exclusive social movement  
DMP: decision-making process  
IRL: in real life  
SM: social movement  
SMO: social movement organisation

# Indications

- The use of the first person plural should not be interpreted as ‘royal we’. Rather, it should be understood as designating the author and the readers together.
- When quoting an IRC conversation, the em dash (—) denotes a line wrap.
- Quotes (‘) relate to words or expressions that are absent from the dictionary or that have a specific meaning in a specific context. They are not used after the first iteration. Double quotes (“) notify a quote.



# 1. Introduction

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (2010, §65-71) invites the reader to engage in a thought experiment: defining the word ‘game’. Initially, the task seems simple enough. Nonetheless, we soon realise how all the elements of definition we can think of are incomplete. We can describe games as ‘amusing’, yet it does not sound right to apply ‘amusing’ to professional sports. Competition can come to mind, but it is not the case with single activities such as the ‘solitaire’ card game or cooperative games such as role-playing. They can be thought of inherently as non-productive, but some have an educational role: the game of Monopoly, for instance, was first designed to teach the monopolistic logic of capitalism.

The same situation applies to Anonymous. Anonymous became known to the greater public in December 2010 as an activist group of shadow hackers attacking financial institutions (e.g., PayPal) because these institutions had blocked access to funds pertaining to the whistleblower organisation ‘WikiLeaks’. Anonymous was notably blocking their websites by flooding them with requests to access. Three years earlier, Anonymous had begun to demonstrate in the streets against the Church of Scientology (CoS) because of its violation of human rights and stifling of freedom of information. After the WikiLeaks events, Anonymous would gain further fame by protesting against repressive regimes during the ‘Arab Spring’, working alongside the anti-finance movement ‘Occupy Wall Street’, and opposing the presence of the ‘Islamic State’ in social media after the Paris attacks of November 2015.

Many individuals who participated in actions under the name of Anonymous were mortified by the description given by the mass media to the public. To them, Anonymous participants are neither activists nor hackers. Further, Anonymous is not shadow nor is it a group. Still, journalists were not completely wrong either, because some parts of Anonymous can be defined like the journalists define it. Let us review these definitions as an introduction to the movement.

As we have seen, Anonymous was participating in activist actions since 2008. However, it was not originally a social movement, but a small internet community revolving around a website called ‘4chan’, launched in 2003. Their first collective actions were what can be called pranks, actions seeking to ridicule a person or organisation for the sake of laughter: for instance, the invasion of virtual worlds and the rigging of internet-based elections. The

term 'hacker' has often been used to define Anonymous, primarily referring to the pirating of electronic systems. Still, few Anonymous participants would define themselves as such, and most actions performed by Anonymous were not meant to take unwarranted control of computers. Many actions are internet-based, but 'offline' operations exist as well, such as when Anonymous performs demonstrations. Anonymous has been described as a shadowy and hidden network. Although many affinity groups within the collective discuss and plan actions privately, Anonymous is very public in the sense that the main platforms of communications are easy to find, accessible and open to newcomers. Finally, Anonymous is usually defined as an association of individuals. Many participants would object and would prefer to argue that Anonymous is best described as an abstract concept, an idea.

My thesis focuses on this idea of Anonymous. Like the concept of game, it is an elusive one and thus needs to be thoroughly investigated to be understood. The present dissertation examines one aspect of this idea, namely the definition of Anonymous by its participants. The definition of a movement by its members is often called 'collective identity' in social movement studies, and as such this thesis is located in this field. Two reasons lie behind my investigation of the collective identity of Anonymous.

First, the organisational logic of Anonymous is different from previous international social movements. In the 1990s, the logic of the global justice movement was to gather different social movement organisations in one point: for instance, the protests alongside the World Trade Organisation Conferences (Della Porta 2005). Anonymous, on its side, can be understood as one entity that executes several operations of a diverse nature and often synchronically. This centrifugal logic, to be contrasted with the centripetal logic of the global justice movement, is new and should not be taken for granted. Why would people who often do not know each other use a same collective name for very diverse and unrelated actions? The notion of collective identity, as will be developed later, can offer some answers.

Second, recent works in social movement studies are divided on the possibilities of existence of collective identity in internet-based social movements. McDonald (2015) considers that collective identity is a thing of the past, whereas Ayers (2003) doubts that collective identity can be formed on electronic platforms of communication. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that current activist collective actions based on social media can be better understood with a 'logic of connective action'. On the other side, several scholars have maintained the idea that collective identity is present in internet-based social movements (e.g., Milan (2015), Gerbaudo (2014)). To study Anonymous from the perspective of collective identity can give new information to foster this debate and also can inform studies on the role of the internet in collective action.



The aim, then, is to offer an understanding of Anonymous' centrifugal logic, as well as to add knowledge to the current debate on collective identity in internet-based social movements. To this intent, the research question is straightforward: What is the collective identity of Anonymous?

The structure of this dissertation is presented below. Chapter two introduces Anonymous, with a description of the actions the movement has performed, the methods the collective have used, and the academic works that have been published concerning the collective. Chapter three offers a theoretical framework that defines the concepts of social movements, identity, and collective identity, and presents the academic debates that concerns them. Chapter four develops the aims and the research question. Chapter five presents the analytical model, the use of Alberto Melucci's model, its limitations and the elements that have been added to construct my own model. Chapter six presents the methodology, the methods used, and the ethical concerns of the research. Chapter seven is dedicated to the analysis and results, each of its sections presenting one component of Anonymous' collective identity: counterculture, action system, organisation, anonymity, and universality. Chapter eight concludes this work with a synthesis of the results, a discussion of the results within the current debate on collective identity, and offers several paths for future research.

The collective that gave itself the name 'Anonymous' is originally a tight internet community interacting on an electronic platform of communication called 4chan, which was created in October 2003. 4chan is an 'image board', a website used for discussion of a variety of topics and focused on picture posts. The Anonymous community became known for its craft of 'internet memes' and their popularisation, as well as for collective actions akin to pranks, which implied the harassment and eventually the ridicule of individuals or organisations for the sake of laughter. Collective actions took an activist turn after the enactment of the campaign 'Project Chanology' (initiated in January 2008), which targeted the CoS because it had attempted to remove material from the video-sharing site YouTube. Considered at first as yet another prank by the participants, the campaign spread out in time, in terms of geographical space, in number of participants, and in actions in an unexpected manner. Some Anonymous participants, or 'Anons', as they call each other, came to consider that the collective could aim for social justice and not just for the pleasure of fun. A part of Anonymous sided with this vision and, in parallel with Chanology, created new campaigns such as 'Anonymous Iran' in June 2009 to protest the allegedly rigged elections in the country. Another branch of Anonymous began to separate itself from 4chan and the platforms of communication of Project Chanology with the campaigns 'Operation Payback' in September 2010 and 'Avenge Assange' in December of the same year. The operations, respectively, protested anti-copyright infringement organisations and the blocking of funds pertaining to

the WikiLeaks whistleblowing organisation. This branch took its autonomy from 4chan as well as from the Chanologists because they recognised the goal of social change but yet did not want to stick to legal means as did the Chanologists. This branch of Anonymous, referred to here as ‘Ubiquitous’ because of its strong heterogeneity, created its own platforms of communication and quickly diversified through a large number of different campaigns, supporting the Occupy movement as well as the insurgents of the Arab Spring, raising a large number of diverse issues such as privacy, freedom of information, freedom of speech, human rights, and environmental issues. These three broad families of Anonymous that are channers (users of 4chan and other image boards), Chanologists and Ubiquitous are still active today.

Anonymous uses a broad range of methods, which can be done by a few skilled persons, for instance electronic penetration (‘hacking’), or *en masse*, such as the invasion of virtual worlds. They can also be done to directly harm a target, such as the release of private contact information (‘doxing’), or for raising the awareness of the public (e.g., with the manipulation of a social media algorithm to make a topic the front page of social media websites). The present work uses these two axes, few/mass and raising awareness/direct action, to construct four analytical categories in which different means are listed. Finally, Anonymous has been approached from different academic schools, including ethnography, social and political thought, social movement theory, and organisation theory.

The third chapter is dedicated to the theoretical background of the current study. First, the present work is situated within the field of social movement studies, where the concept of social movement is defined, an overview of the history of social movement studies is presented, and the problematics that have concerned the concepts of identity, collective identity, and place of social movements on the internet are developed. Last but not least, a brief presentation is offered on the debates on the alleged existence or disappearance of collective identity in internet-based social movements.

Chapter four develops the aim and research questions that were introduced earlier.

Chapter five presents the analytical model used in this dissertation. It is based on Alberto Melucci (1989, 1995, 1996) model of collective identity to which has been added several components to fit my observations of Anonymous. Melucci developed his theory of collective identity from his own observations of social movements that occurred during the 1980s (Melucci 1989, 2). They are akin to the general structure of Anonymous: collective actions emerge from “networks submerged in everyday life” (Melucci 1996, 345), countercultural social networks pervasive to everyday interactions. He proposes that collective identity can be understood by studying three analytically distinct components: the social network that constitutes the movement, the emotions that participants invest in, and the ideas that define the move-

ment and that each participant bears in mind, what he calls collective identity cognitive definitions (which I will also refer to as 'CICDs'). Focus is on how these definitions are constructed, exchanged, and co-habiting within the social network. Collective identity is then the process as well as the result of negotiations between participants who bear different and sometimes contradictory CICDs.

Melucci considered that the collective identity definitions of a social movement concerned its goals, means, and how it related to its environment. It is because he considered social movements from the characteristics of their actions and therefore discarded other possible components that defined the larger submerged network from which the social movement is a part. It is not something to be desired in our case because Anonymous is much more than a collective centred on activist actions. Consequently, all CICDs that concern its submerged network should be studied. Accordingly, this dissertation developed a grounded theory approach to identify Anonymous' collective identity definitions and added other types of CICDs that concern Anonymous' counterculture, its organisation, its anonymity, and its universality.

To this effect, an ethnographic approach was employed, which is presented in chapter six. Four methods are used in this work: participant observation, interviews, documentary analysis, and respondent feedback. Participant observation, the pillar of ethnography, is essential to the understanding of the culture of a community. In addition, it provides insights into the stakes, meanings, and emotional involvement of individuals (Junker 1960). It allows the researcher the possibility to study intersubjective processes of collective identity formation. To that effect, I have spent three years in different chat rooms (internet Relay Chats, or IRC) dedicated to Anonymous. Interviews have permitted me to grasp the thoughts of participants as well as to receive an account of their past and present experiences. Text and artefact analysis is performed on forum discussions, image boards and wikis. They were useful to find information on the formation of collective identity in present and past times. Finally, participant feedback consisted in asking participants to review the work of the researcher. It helped in obtaining an additional understanding of the point of view of the participants, as well as to check whether I was misled in my findings. I finally describe my experience in the field, the ethical concerns that appeared, and the questions of representativeness and generalisability.

Chapter seven presents the analysis. The present research finds that the collective identity of Anonymous rests on five sets of definition. Not all groups and individuals that reclaim themselves as Anonymous recognise their totality, but they all accept a number of them that are sufficient to legitimate their own belonging to the movement, and most of the time to be recognised by others as such. The different groups constituting Anonymous are therefore symbolically linked through a web of collective identity definitions

rather than an encompassing and unified collective identity. This gives the movement a heterogeneous composition while at the same time permitting it to retain a sense of identity that explains the use of a collective name. The five main self-defining concepts are related to 1) Anonymous' subculture, 2) its personification into two personae with differing goals, means, and relationships with the environment, 3) its organisation and decision-making process, 4) practices of anonymity and attached ethics of self-effacement, and 5) its definition as a universal entity. Alongside the description of these definitions, focus is on the tensions resulting from the expression of sometimes-contradictory components, as well as the tensions resulting from the difference between collective identity definitions and actual practices. These tensions often result in discursive and performative processes of reaffirmation of CICDs.

The first set of collective identity components is developed as a counter-cultural reaction against commonly agreed customs on the lifeworld level (the set of norms that permits interpersonal communication) and that are related with Anonymous to conceptions of politeness, dignity, propriety, and the 'politically correct'. Anonymous indeed defines itself through the use of offensive vocabulary, aesthetics (with the creation of cultural artefacts), types of conversation, and speech act such as trolling. Next to offense is parrhesia, the practice of the declaration of the blunt truth with no concern for hurting.

Second, Anonymous personified itself through the construction of two archetypal figures that are (as they are named here) the 'trickster', who yearns for amusement, and the 'hero', who seeks social justice. These two goals are complementary as much as they can come to contradiction because the hero needs a good public image and the trickster can perform immoral acts that flaw it. I explain how the goals, means, and relationship with the environment that the two archetypes hold are related with one another and how they permit participants to express one archetype or the other, or a hybrid of both.

Third, Anonymous is attached to horizontal organisations and participatory democracy. Hierarchy and representation should be proscribed and decisions should be taken by all participants through consensus or vote. These self-definitional principles are in tension with phenomena such as the "dictatorship of action" (Milan 2013a, 93-4), when the necessity to act fast limits participatory democratic processes, the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman 1972), when the lack of visible hierarchy and representation ends up with the formation of shadowy cliques, and types of charismatic authority that have developed and that are often seen in internet communities (O'Neil 2009, 29). In reaction to these limitations to the expression of the horizontal and democratic CICDs, participants reaffirm the latter through discourse and actions related to the participation and creation of collective actions.

Fourth, to be Anonymous means to embrace a certain relationship to anonymity based on protection, the construction of a desirable community, and the adoption of ethics of self-effacement in which the refusal to lead and the refusal to claim one's actions, the sacrifice of potentially heightened popularity and power, are the qualities of the virtuous individual as a good citizen and as a balanced person. Tensions appear, again, between these principles and actual practices.

Fifth, and last, Anonymous holds a universalist view of itself in the sense that it considers that anyone is a potential Anonymous and that Anonymous can potentially be anything. It is shown how this can be problematic when Anonymous is urged to define itself to the outside world for public relationship requirements. Finally, the present work explains how universality is used and expressed through inter-group recognition, the call to action to individuals outside of the Anonymous' network, and the use of the collective name outside the submerged network.

The final and eighth chapter, the general conclusion, presents a summary of the results, and places the findings—notably the suggested notion of connective identity—within the current debate concerning collective identity in internet-enabled social movements. Furthermore, chapter eight proposes pathways for future research. No specific theoretical model can encompass the variety of collective identity types and roles in social movements (Bakardjieva 2015, 989), and Anonymous is a singular entity. The modular form of its collective identity can be situated between two contrasting models: on one side, a molar collective identity construction that attempts to reach an homogeneity of meaning for a whole movement (Gamson 1997), and on the other, a molecular 'connective action' in which actors are linked through vague and easily individualised collective action frames (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Modular collective identity, which could also be called 'connective identity', is situated somewhere in between by offering to the participants different definitional options to relate to a movement without these definitions being individually customised.

## 2. Presentation of Anonymous

*Don't worry, we're from the internet.*

*Sign displayed during an Anonymous demonstration.*

In this chapter a chronological presentation of the formation and actions of Anonymous is given, followed by a description of the methods that are used during collective action. Finally, a review of the current literature is carried out.

### 2.1. Chronology of actions

From 2003 to 2015, Anonymous has taken three main distinct forms that appeared at specific times but are chronologically linked into each other by overlapping. Anonymous first emerged on the bulletin board 4chan, an electronic platform dedicated to discussions and image sharing. Anonymous also focused on creating cultural artefacts and performing pranks. Another branch emerged in 2008 during 'Project Chanology', a series of collective actions targeting the Church of Scientology (CoS). It distinguished itself from the original community by its assumed activism. Over the years, Chanologists diversified their goals to half a dozen operations. A third branch of Anonymous began to distinguish itself from 4chan and Chanology in the beginning of 2010 with protests against internet censorship in Australia, and more explicitly during protests against anti-piracy organisations attacking file-sharing platforms as well as financial organisations blocking funds to WikiLeaks, the whistleblower organisation. It contrasted with the first two by their assumed activism as well as their acceptance of the use of illegal methods, which the Chanologists proscribed. Soon, this branch largely diversified the themes of its campaigns (called 'operations') as well as their numbers. For this reason, this branch is referred to in this work as 'Ubiquitous'. All of the branches mentioned are active at the time of this writing, although the pranksters of 4chan and cousin platforms tend to use the Anonymous moniker less often.

This partition does not do credit to the heterogeneity of Anonymous, nor its size. There are other groups, often-autonomous offshoots of the aforementioned branches, that are not covered here because of lack of time/space

and data. For instance, the offline local communities that emerged during Chanology are not discussed here (for research on the offline Anonymous UK group, see the work of Peacock (2015)). There are as well a significant number of groups and individuals that answer to the principles of Ubiquitous Anonymous without being present in its main platforms of communication. Still, the focus on the three main branches permits us to recognise the main characteristics of Anonymous' collective identity and the main lines of tension. I am indebted to the chronology of Pendergrass (2013) for the recount of events in this chapter. I am also indebted to an anonymous author who wrote a detailed and thoughtful history of 4chan (anonymous 2015).

### 2.1.1. Channers: the birth of Anonymous on the image board 4chan

The image board 4chan is the birthplace of Anonymous. Originally limited to a small community, it has become extremely popular. In May 2014, the site attracted 174,000 visitors (number taken from siteanalytics.com). moot (nickname with the first letter always written in lower case), civil name Christopher Pool, launched the website on the first of October 2003, initially as a platform for discussing manga and anime. People visit image boards to discuss and post pictures. It is divided into different sections called 'boards' that all have their own themes (anime, movies, sports, etc.). In each board there are a hundred 'threads' where the discussions take place. 4chan is an ephemeral social media: threads are deleted to give place to others. Threads can last from a few minutes to a few days, where their longevity is determined by the number of posts they receive.

The first population of 4chan originates mostly from regulars of the forum Something Awful who were unsatisfied with the forum's strict policy on content moderation (anonymous 2015, 9). Soon, the users of 4chan came to name their collective 'Anonymous', and called themselves with the diminutive 'Anon', in reference to their practice of anonymity and the word that is displayed instead of the author name when they post anonymously on 4chan. At the time, Anonymous people were also called '4channers' or 'channers' in reference to the platform they use. Next to 4chan, other image boards were created, with a similar culture but different policies and focus like '7chan', '8chan', '420chan' and '711chan'.

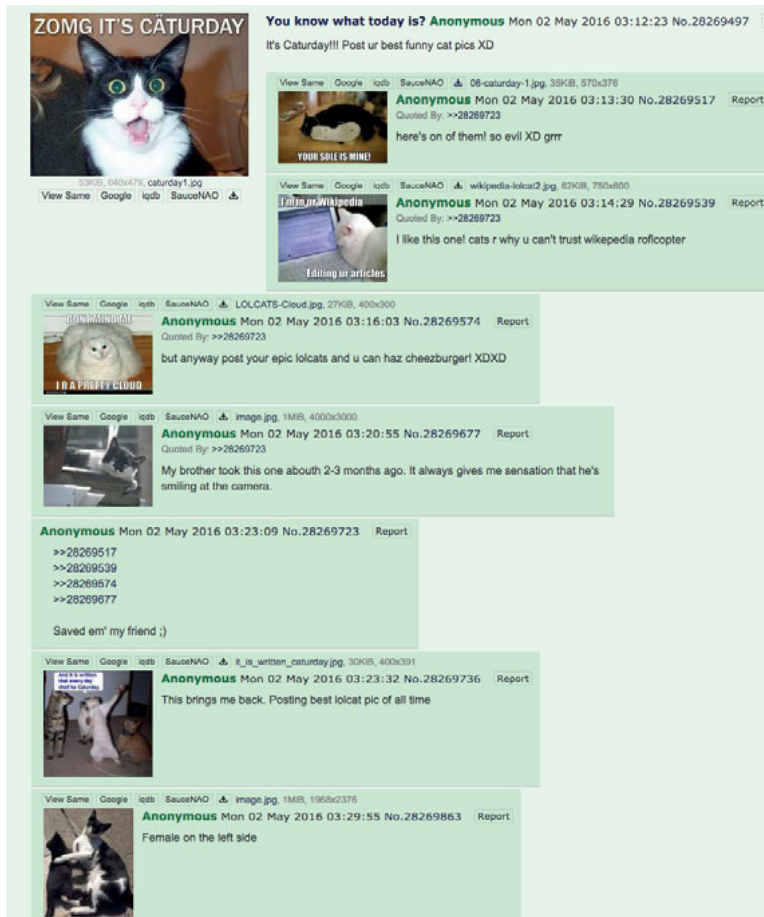


Figure 1. Screenshot of an archived 4chan thread.

Anonymous began collective action with pranking. Pranks usually take the form of harassment against individuals, communities, or organisations for the sake of laughter, or in vernacular, ‘for the lulz’, lulz being a derivative of ‘LOL’, itself an acronym for ‘Laughing out loud’. ‘For the lulz’ originally means to have fun at the expense of someone. The first instance of large scale collective action was the invasion of the virtual world ‘Habbo Hotel’ in July 2006 (Pendergrass 2013, 65). Habbo Hotel is a virtual world targeting teenagers and pre-teenagers. An Anonymous participant and public figure Gregg Housh explained that the original reason for attacking Habbo was that one of the avatar that could be chosen looked like “a racist white guy’s idea of a black guy” (Knafo 2012). The website ‘knowyourmeme.com’ gives another version and states that the action originated from the rumour that Habbo’s moderators were “prone to racial profiling against dark-skinned avatar users and abusing their ban powers to keep them out of the site” (Knowyourmeme 2014). Afterwards, collective pranks were performed



spontaneously but regularly. In December of 2006, users of '/b/', the general discussions channel of 4chan, launched a distributed denial of service attack ('DDoS attack', see section 2.2.4) to paralyse access to the website of white nationalist and radio host Hal Turner, published his and his parents' phone numbers, and sent pizzas and escort girls to his home. In July of 2008, the swastika sign hit the list of the most searched terms on Google because of the actions of 4channers. In May 2011, /b/ planned the 'forever alone involuntary flash mob': Anons created fake female accounts on dating sites to lure single men into meeting them in New York's Time Square for a fictitious date under the eye of live webcams (Brayden 2011). In August 2008, Anonymous attacked radical feminist websites, an action partly linked to the discovery of alleged child abuse from a mother to her son (Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015c). In October of 2008, 4chan spread the rumour that Apple Chairman Steve Jobs had died from a heart attack, causing Apple's stock price to fall about 10% and Steve Jobs to announce two weeks later: "the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated" (Quittner 2008). In February 2009, after the publication of a YouTube video depicting a teenager abusing a cat, members of /b/ searched and found his identity, called his mother, and eventually got him arrested (Pendergrass 2013, 73). In April of 2009, Anonymous manipulated Time Magazine's online readers' poll of the top 100 Most Influential People of 2009 so that the founder of 4chan occupied the first position (ibid., 232). In July 2010, pop singer Justin Bieber decided to offer to popular vote the location of the first venue of his next world tour. Anonymous voted *en masse* and elected North Korea. During the same month, the harassment (prank calls, abusive emails, pizza delivering, etc.) of eleven-year-old Jessica Leonhardt occurred, who attracted the ire of 4chan because of her self-display on social media, considered as a phony and cringing posturing of a girl trying to behave like a lewd and aggressive woman (Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015d). In November and December 2012, Anonymous turned its attention back to Time magazine by electing Kim Jong Un as the most influential person of the year. In July 2011, Anonymous hacked Rupert Murdoch's News International System and published a fake article stating his death. In August 2012, the restaurant chain Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen sponsored a contest where it accepted online suggestions to name Mountain Dew's new soda. Anonymous elected the names 'Diabeetus', 'Gushing Granny' and 'Hitler did nothing wrong'. Anons also hacked in and modified the website of the contest, adding a banner that read "Mtn Dew salutes the Israeli Mossad for demolishing 3 towers on 9/11!" (Zimmerman 2015). In the same month, Anonymous hijacked a promotion contest featuring singer Taylor Swift. The sponsors were offering high schools in the US the possibility to win money for their school's music department. Boston's Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing won the contest with the votes of Anonymous. In October 2012, Anonymous

targeted pop singer Justin Bieber again and spread the rumour that he was suffering from cancer. The fake campaign #baldforbieber was launched, notably on Twitter, urging fans to shave their heads to show their support.



Figure 2. On the left side, a tempered picture of Justin Bieber that was propagated in social media. On the right, screenshot of a news media Twitter account.

In September 2013, channers created a fake advertising campaign concerning the iPhone, claiming that it was now waterproof, to the dismay of the few users who tested the new sham feature. Anonymous used the same tactics in September 2014 when the rumour spread that Apple's smartphone could now be charged by putting it in the microwave. This resulted in many users complaining on Twitter that their phones got destroyed.



Figure 3. On the left, fake iPhone announcement propagated in social media. On the right, tweet of an individual who has supposedly tried the sham feature.

One particular prank that began in January 2008 and targeted the CoS marked Anonymous by the conversion of part of the movement to activism. These events are described in the next section.

### 2.1.2. Chanologists: Project Chanology and the activist turn

Project Chanology was a pivotal point in the history of Anonymous in the sense that it marked its activist turn. In January 2008, the video of an interview with an elated Tom Cruise praising the CoS leaked on YouTube. The video was originally shot only for the members of the CoS, so that shortly after the Church demanded YouTube and other sites that had re-published the video to remove it or face legal action. The news snowballed on 4chan and was interpreted as an act of censorship that could not be left unpunished. A proposal for launching a harassment campaign against the CoS was posted and was met with considerable enthusiasm. Anonymous gave to this campaign the name 'Project Chanology'. Anonymous began by launching several DDoS attacks against the websites of the Church. Simultaneously, Anonymous flooded Scientology centres with black faxes and prank calls. Some databases were penetrated and confidential documents leaked, notably on the whistleblowing website WikiLeaks. In the end of the month, a Google bomb (see section 2.2.1) was built to make the CoS the first result to appear when 'dangerous cult' was typed into Google. Members of Anonymous performed social media manipulation so that Scientology-related topics became heavily publicised. For instance, for a few weeks they became the top most read articles on the website digg.com (America\_Pink 2016).

In the beginning of February, the first live demonstration appeared in Orlando, Florida and then in San Diego, California in the USA. Small protests were also held in Santa Barbara, California, as well as in Manchester, England. On the 10th of February, 7000 people in 100 hundred cities globally protested in front of the CoS centres. Thereafter, demonstrations were performed each month for a year each with different themes. The March demonstration hosted about the same number of participants. The April demonstration, with 5000 estimated protesters in over 50 cities globally, called attention to the CoS practices of separating Church members from their close significant others. The May demonstration protested the CoS' harassment of the press and of ex-members. In June, Anonymous protested the poor conditions (akin to forced labour) in which the 'Sea Org', an 'elite' group of Scientology workers, were living. In July, a new wave of demonstrations protested the Office of Special Affairs, the intelligence and threat-removal branch of the CoS. In September, the participants protested Scientology's attempts to lobby the school system and change course content. In October, participants dressed as zombies to highlight questionable deaths and suicides of Scientologists. In December, Anonymous disrupted the premiere of Tom Cruise's latest movie, forcing the actor to avoid the red carpet and use an underground tunnel in Los Angeles (Hall 2008). During the whole year and amid these themed global protests, numerous local initiatives were undertaken.

Project Chanology had settled platforms of communication (forums and chatrooms) autonomous to 4chan and began to form a community distinct from the rest of Anonymous. I will name ‘Chanologists’ the individuals that are part of this community. Chanologists began to diversify their actions in 2009, shortly after Project Chanology began to lose momentum. (“A lot of people got bored with Chanology but not Anonymous and wanted something new” (Anon19)). The first campaign launched after Project Chanology was ‘Anonymous Iran’ in June 2009, an operation that protested the internet censorship imposed by the Ahmadinejad government. It involved teaching the Iranian insurgents how to securely use the internet and bypass censorship, and publishing videos on YouTube on the behalf of Iranian activists who could not publish them themselves because of the censorship. At the time of this writing, the main forum of Chanologists, ‘WhyWeProtest’, had five thematic sections dedicated to activist campaigns: Scientology, freedom of information, Occupy Wall Street, sexual assault and child abuse.

During 2010, a third branch of Anonymous separated itself from 4chan and Chanology because of its activist stance and choice to resort to illegal actions. In the next section, a description of the events occurring during this autonomisation is given as well as the actions undertaken by this branch.

### 2.1.3. Ubiquitous Anonymous: Anonymous everywhere

In the beginning of 2010, channers (users of 4chan and other related image boards) created the campaign ‘Operation Titstorm’ in reaction to a plan of the Australian government to block access to some types of pornographic content that included bestiality, rape, cartoon porn, and female ejaculation, as well as some gambling sites and sites showing drug use (Leyden 2010). Many Chanologists took part in the action, normally avoiding the use of plainly illegal methods (such as DDoS), which was the main tactic of the campaign. Indeed, early on the participants of Project Chanology had decided to ban illegal means. Some Chanologists decided not to participate because of their inclusion in the campaign. In September 2010, some 4channers launched ‘Operation Payback’ to protest the Motion Picture Association of America that had hired a private company to DDoS file-sharing websites. Discussions related to ‘Payback’ settled in platforms of communication used by Chanologists. However, as its name implies, Payback had, like ‘Titstorm’, the launch of DDoS attacks as its primary tactic. Chanologists, however, refused to allow their platforms to be used to prepare these blatant illegal acts. Participants to Payback were then asked to leave. After some peregrination, Operation Payback set up an independent IRC server called ‘AnonOps’. Because of the use of DDoS, which looked like a new, original (and excitingly illegal) means of performing activism, the movement drew more attention from the media. Anonymous campaigns estab-

lished on AnonOps quickly multiplied and diversified. A positive feedback loop developed between media attention, number of participants, and number of operations. The more the media exposed Anonymous to public scrutiny the more it attracted newcomers. The increasing number of new participants caused the creation of more campaigns, which again attracted media attention. This dynamic resulted in what Gabriella Coleman (2014, 143) calls “Anonymous everywhere”, where Anonymous launched operations with very diverse themes, but with the similarity that they were all considered matters of social justice. Paraphrasing Coleman, I call this branch ‘Ubiquitous Anonymous’, which became a nebula of numerous and diverse operations with connections that are at most uncertain, except for the sharing of cultural traits. Its central node is AnonOps IRC, accompanied by neighbouring smaller servers with a longer or shorter lifespan, such as ‘Anonset’ or ‘Voxanon’, as well as some news sites and a network of Twitter users. Below, is a selective chronology of Ubiquitous’ actions. They are sorted through the main themes of action they acted on: information and internet freedom, repression in the Middle East, state abuse and repression, economic and class issues, and sexual and personal abuse.

### **Information and internet freedom**

In December 2010, Anonymous created ‘Operation Avenge Assange’ as a reaction against organisations that were blocking funds from WikiLeaks. DDoS attacks were launched against the websites of PayPal, MasterCard, and Visa, among others. Anonymous has regularly launched campaigns against governments and allied corporations that were applying or planning to apply some sort of internet censorship, including website filters, which often goes along with internet data surveillance. These campaigns commonly use DDoS attacks and website defacements as main tactics that are, as we will see in section 2.2, a means of direct action as well as a means of raising awareness to attract the attention of the public on the topic. Among the dozens of instances, Anonymous attacked Turkish government websites in June 2011 in protest of the government’s plan to instate a website filter; Sony corporation in January 2012 because it was backing an American anti-piracy law; the United Kingdom’s supreme court during the same year because it had the blocking of all access to the file-sharing website ‘The Pirate Bay’; several Indian government websites in reaction to another internet censorship bill. Offline demonstrations have also been used, including those that were performed against a European anti-piracy bill in January 2012 in the streets of England, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands.

### **State repression.**

Anonymous has protested against governments repressing activist expressions or violating human rights. Anonymous assisted all the uprisings during

the ‘Arab Spring’ that began in January 2011 in Tunisia, attacking government websites through DDoS and website defacement, as well as teaching protesters how to safely communicate through the internet and circumvent online censorship. On several occasions, Anonymous has targeted the Israeli government to protest their policy towards Palestine and released a manual describing how to evade Israeli electronic surveillance. Sudan, Uganda, and Nigeria were targeted because of their criminalisation of homosexuality. Local and federal law enforcement agencies in the United States have been attacked because of police violence and racial discrimination after the shooting of an African-American teenager in August 2014 (‘Operation Ferguson’).

### **Economic and class issues.**

Anonymous has a tradition of going after financial institutions and corporations that have been accused of conducting unscrupulous activities. In March 2011, for instance, some participants leaked mail correspondence revealing mechanisms of money laundering carried out by a branch of Bank of America. During the same month, Anonymous hacked a Monsanto company database and leaked 2,500 employees’ contact information in protest of lawsuits against organic dairy farmers. In September 2011, part of Anonymous gave its support to the Occupy Wall Street movement. The collective was allegedly instrumental in spreading the first call to demonstration up to the critical point when mass media began to discuss the issue (Captain 2011). ‘CabinCr3w’, an offshoot of Anonymous, released the identity of a NYPD officer who pepper-sprayed two Occupy Wall Street protesters. They also released personal information concerning the CEOs of several important banks and financial institutions. A month after Anonymous launched a DDoS attack against the website of the financial market platform NYSE. In November 2011, Anonymous announced that it had penetrated databases of several important banks as well as ‘Stratfor’, a private intelligence company, and acquired information from 100,000 credit cards. They also claimed to have donated money to charities from some of these credit card accounts.

### **Sexual abuse**

Anonymous has been taking action related to matters of paedophilia, personal harassment, and rape. There have been long-term campaigns to shut down paedo-pornographic websites and to identify their users. Here, Anonymous has taken a role of vigilantes rather than activists, applying the law instead of questioning it. In November 2011, they were able to collect the IP addresses of 200 individuals visiting child pornography websites, IPs that were sent to the police. In March 2012, Anonymous took down the website of the Vatican’s office in protest of its stance against abortion and handling of paedophilia scandals. On several other occasions, Anonymous would

identify and release the identity of presumed paedophiles. Anonymous has also taken action related to abuse and rape. In December 2012, an offshoot of Anonymous—‘KnightSec’—launched a DDoS attack against a ‘revenge porn’ website, where men posted pictures of their ex-girlfriends, by releasing the contact details of those who had posted the pictures. The same offshoot became involved in the case of a rape that had happened in August 2012 when a young female teenager was abused under the influence of alcohol by several classmates. Local authorities were trying to stall the investigation inasmuch as the culprits were part of the town’s treasured football team. KnightSec leaked incriminating videos, photographs, and messages stored in the phones of the offenders and their friends. Two demonstrations were organised in the city to support the rape victim.

### **Miscellaneous**

Anonymous has targeted organisations considered racist or were seen to undermine human rights and human dignity. For instance, In January 2012, Anonymous released the identity of alleged donors to the National Democratic Party of America. On several occasions, they also launched attacks against the ultra-conservative Westboro Baptist Church, defacing its website, releasing contact information of its members, and launching a petition to declare the church as a hate group and rescind their tax free status in December 2012. Since April 2012, a team of Anons has lobbied for the legalisation of marijuana. Anonymous has sustained a longstanding environmental campaign called ‘Operation Greenrights’. In June 2013, it leaked emails from the websites of Shell, Exxon, BP, and Gazprom to protest oil drilling in the Arctic. In December 2013, Anonymous launched ‘Operation Safe Winter’ in several cities worldwide, created to help homeless people by giving them material resources and moral support (Murphy 2004). Finally, in January 2015, Anonymous responded to the Charlie Hebdo shooting by starting a campaign to identify and report Islamist Twitter accounts. This effort continued after the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015.

The next section details the means used by Anonymous in its collective action. Although the means used are numerous and diverse, they can be arranged into four analytical categories.

## 2.2. Means

*Because in the end this is what it is, an information war.*

*Anon20*

Anonymous uses a wide array of methods that can seem unruly at first. However, these various methods can be given some sense by drawing an analytical map based on two axes. The first axis concerns the number of people involved in the action and the quality of the individual action. On one pole, there are mass actions made of a rather simple behaviour performed synchronically by a large number of agents, and its strength relies in the quantity of persons involved (it is usually called a ‘swarm’, see p. 144). On the other pole, actions are carried out by one individual or a small group of individuals, where its strength relies on the quality of the action taken. The latter is referred to here as ‘elite’ action in reference to the ‘l33tspeak<sup>1</sup>’ translation ‘l33t’ that connotes, often in an ironic manner, that participants are skilled in electronic penetration. The second axis concerns whether the action is a means of direct action or propaganda. By direct action, I mean “the attempt to effect political change immediately” (Jordan and Taylor 2004, 68), such as harming directly a target or helping an ally. Propaganda as used here does not mean disinformation — though it can also be part of it — but rather refers to the act of spreading a political message to the public. Often collective actions lead to both effects, a spectacular direct action getting the attention of the public and raising awareness being able to harm the reputation of a target and to damage that target. Many tactics, however, are chosen more for one effect than the other. These two axes permit the analytical categorisation of four types of collective action (described below): mass propaganda, elite propaganda, elite direct action, and mass direct action. The names of the tactics used are underlined in this section

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<sup>1</sup> L33tspeak (deformation of ‘leetspeak’) is a pidgin used by computer hackers since the 1980s.



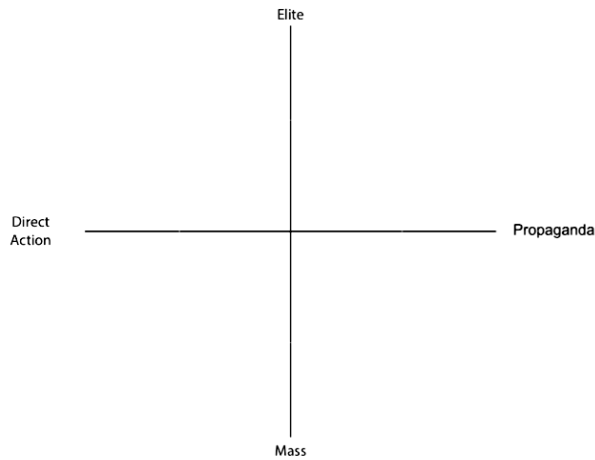


Figure 4. Categorisation of the means used by Anonymous

### 2.2.1. Mass propaganda

Anonymous is skilled in the art of manipulating social and mass media. This form of manipulation is what one of my respondents calls “infowar” (Anon20). Anonymous performs electronic disinformation, with the spread of fake news through the creation of fake websites, fake social media accounts, reverberation of the news between these fake accounts that grasp the attention of people, and website algorithms built to detect trending topics, with an eye for crafting narratives that will be believed in and shared. We can think of the fake Apple announcements described in section 2.1.1 or the hoax ‘fappy the dolphin’ in section 7.2.5. Tools for spreading disinformation can also be used to spread ‘real’ news in an attempt to raise awareness. A ‘social bombing’ is the artificial (as in ‘forced’) publicisation of an issue in social media. A ‘Twitter storm’, for instance, consists in sending as a group the same Twitter message at the same time from as many accounts as possible, manipulating Twitter algorithms displaying trending topics so that the issue publicised by Anonymous becomes highly visible in the public sphere. It often implies the creation of a great number of fake accounts and the hashtag linking to other trending topics. Appendix 1 shows a guideline that was posted on Anonymous platforms of communication to explain how to participate in a Twitter storm protesting the death of a hacktivist in January 2013. Anonymous also took part in what they call paper storms, a classic offline pamphlet handling and postering.

Social bombings are also performed on other social media, such as Facebook and forums with the creation of many threads and posts, with the same attempt to manipulate trending-topic detection algorithms to gain more pub-

licisation. Project Chanology distinguished itself by spreading propaganda to a large number of social media platforms, even minor ones. Anons connected *en masse* to the online webcam chat website ‘chatroulette’. They also invested the more obscure ‘www.drawball.com’, a webpage that hosts a very large picture in which anyone can draw over anyone else’s work. Anons were able to keep an advertising campaign of Chanology for several months (Anon20) (see figure 5). During ‘Anonymous Iran’ in 2009, Anonymous made a deal with the popular file-sharing platform ‘thepiratebay.org’: the website changed its homepage into an advertisement of the operation. Those who clicked on the ‘click here to help Iran’ central logo were redirected to the #iran channel of the IRC AnonNet server.



Figure 5. On the left, screen capture of the website ‘drawball’ in 2008. On the right, screen capture of the ‘The Pirate Bay’ website during ‘Anonymous Iran’.

Another example of electronic media manipulation is the Google bomb. A Google bomb is a technique that artificially links a particular Google query with websites that are originally unrelated to it. It is done by manipulating the Google algorithm mechanism that ranks a website higher in the Google search results. If words in a particular Google search are similar to those present in the hyperlinks of a webpage, this webpage will appear. The tactic is then to create as many bogus websites and hyperlinks as possible to artificially link a specific Google search with a specific webpage. It has notably been used during Chanology to link the query “dangerous cult” to the website of the CoS.

Finally, counter-censorship is the act of duplicating data that could disappear because of state or corporate censorship. This is one of the first tactics Project Chanology adopted when the CoS attempted to remove the Tom Cruise video from the internet. Anonymous created dozens of ‘mirrors’, copies of the same video in different servers so that removing all of them was impossible. The same method was also used during Anonymous Iran in

2009 when Anons published online materials that Iranian insurgents could not post themselves due to state censorship.

### 2.2.2. Elite propaganda

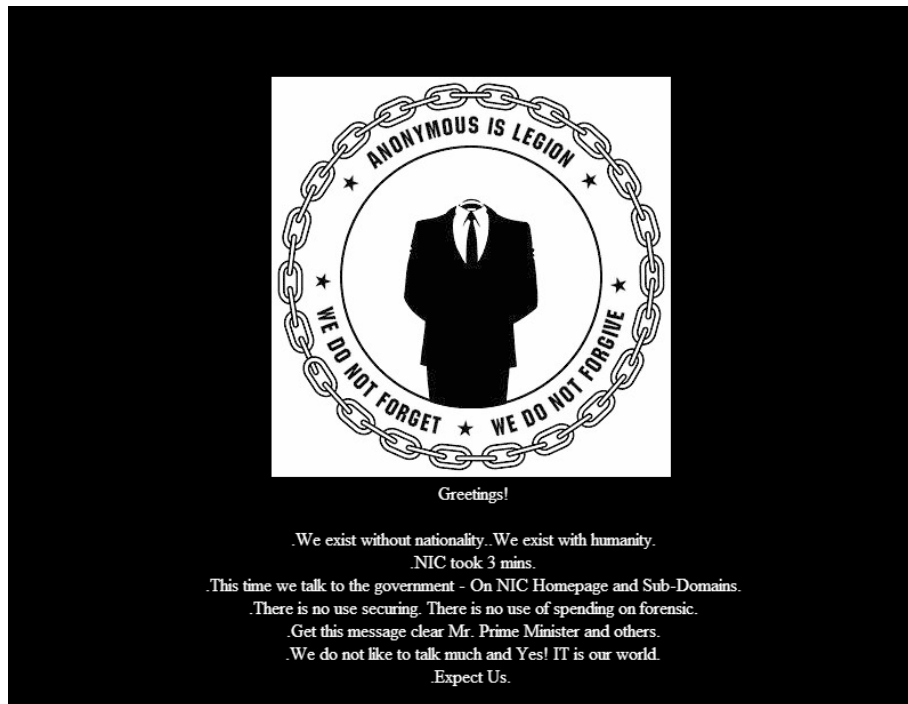
Elite propaganda is mostly enacted through database penetration to leak documents to raise awareness. Electronic ‘penetration’ (vernacular term in the field of computer security) refers to exploiting weaknesses within a software to get unwarranted control of a machine, access to its data, or both. The penetration of a database here is used to acquire classified information and leak it to the public in order to sensitise an issue. This act is usually called whistleblowing. Anonymous supported three well-known whistleblowers: Chelsea Manning, who disclosed U.S. classified diplomatic cables in 2010, Julian Assange, who published the cables through his website ‘WikiLeaks’, and Edward Snowden, who disclosed classified National Security Agency (NSA) files in 2013. The aim was to shed light on America’s foreign policy in the first and second case, and on the methods of surveillance of the NSA and other spy agencies in the third. Anonymous’ support for these whistleblowers took two forms. First, during the blocking of WikiLeaks’ funds by financial institutions in the end of 2010 Anonymous performed DDoS against them. Second, some Anons allegedly had available the decryption key (that permits the opening of an encrypted documents) of released encrypted files that contained (more) sensitive information leaked by Snowden. They serve as a dead man’s switch: the key would be released in the event Snowden was to be killed. Whistleblowing has also been performed directly, such as in the Steubenville rape case, where Anons revealed the tentative cover up of the prosecution by local authorities. In 2012, an Anonymous team called ‘Par:AnoIA’ constructed an online platform dedicated to host and analyse leaks. The site, for instance, has released documents leaked from the Cambodian government and from pharmaceutical companies (Murphy 2012).

Finally, the mail gun is a list of emails of a large number of journalists worldwide (tens of thousands of contacts is a good mail gun). It is a powerful tool to publicise an Anonymous operation or any other event. Chanology had individuals in possession of mail guns reaching supposedly 300,000 emails (Anon21).

### 2.2.3. Elite direct action

Combining direct action with the participation of a small group of hackers, elite direct action mostly takes the form of electronic penetration. Website defacement aims at ridiculing a target by showing how insecure its system is. It can also be used to make a political statement to be written on the

webpage, or to impede the service it gives. Below, is a screenshot of the defacement of an Indian governmental organisation in June 2011.



*Figure 6. Defaced webpage of the National Informatics Centre, an Indian governmental organisation, in June 2011.*

Another method is to access a database and possibly leak information, an act that can give “temporary reputational damage” (Anon20). For instance, it can be used to ridicule a target by the very fact that it has been hacked. This was the case for the electronic security firm HBGary in 2011, which, because of the very nature of its business, seriously damaged the company’s reputation and compelled its CEO to step down. Damages can be of a different nature depending on the type of leaks. The company can go into bad terms with certain groups of the population, such as business clients or customers if the leaks concern them. That was the case when in 2012, to protest surveillance laws in Australia, Anonymous leaked a large number of customer data pertaining to the landline telecommunication company AAPT.

Harming an organisation can also be done by attempting to scare its employees by releasing their contact details. This is what happened with the Monsanto leak of 2011 when Anonymous released information on 2,500 employees (Mills 2015). ‘Doxing’ (or ‘doxxing’, the abbreviation of ‘document tracing’) is the name of this practice of releasing personal information. Doxing is not only about releasing private personal information but it also

designates a person as a target for potential harassment. Doxing has also been committed on presumed paedophiles and police officers accused of illegitimate violence.

Social engineering is well valued within Anonymous. It is the psychological manipulation of an individual in order to access information, to acquire an object, or to make someone do something. The Anonymous splinter cell 'LulzSec' enacted a celebrated social engineering feat when a member was granted administrative access to the server of the electronic security firm 'HBGary' by tricking one of its administrators into giving the CEO's password by impersonating the latter through email (Olson 2012, ch. 1).

A botnet is a system made of a large number of computers, usually called 'bots', 'zombies', or 'slaves' that have been infected by a piece of software called 'trojan'. The trojan permits a remote user, sometimes called 'botmaster', to take control of the slaves through the internet. The slaves, which can be scattered throughout the world, can then, for instance, perform DDoS attacks without the consent or knowledge of their owners. Botnets are usually comprised of several hundreds to several millions of zombies and can be owned or hired. Botnets have been used in many operations involving DDoS attacks, including 'Avenge Assange' in 2010.

Finally, some methods are not hostile but are meant to help an ally. Anonymous wrote documentations during 'Anonymous Iran' and the Arab Spring operations to teach the insurgents how to remain anonymous (literally) on the internet, how to upload files despite state firewalls, and how to launch attacks on government websites. Skilled Anons can help to secure electronic servers of allies through 'penetration testing' and fixing the software if weaknesses were found. Websites related to *Occupy Wall Street* movements have benefitted from this sort of help (Captain 2011).

#### 2.2.4. Mass direct action

Mass direct actions are often called 'swarms' or 'raids'; they are actions relying on a great number of participants who each perform simple acts. The raid of the virtual world 'Habbo hotel' in 2006 is a good example: the more the number of people connected to the virtual world, the more the attack proved disruptive. The distributed denial of a service attack (DDoS attack) is the most common swarm attack in activist actions. Such an attack is aimed at making a webpage unavailable. A 'denial of service' happens when a user repeatedly asks a server for access to a website. A distributed denial of service attack happens when several users perform a DoS attack at the same time. When the number of requests exceeds the server's capacity to handle them, the website becomes unavailable. Today, to be effective, depending on the capacities of the servers hosting the targeted webpage, a DDoS needs to be anywhere from a hundred to tens of thousands of actors. For example, the

DDoS that struck PayPal and Amazon during ‘Operation Avenge Assange’ in 2010 reported several thousand participants though it is probable that botnets alone accounted for the success of the operation. After the attack, PayPal claimed damages of 4.25 million euros, most of which came from the hiring of a security firm to strengthen PayPal’s capacity to endure future DDoS (Laville 2012). Besides PayPal, other victims of Anonymous DDoS have been the Church of Scientology and the Westboro Baptist Church, several anti-copyright infringement firms and public administrations, as well as other state and corporate websites of diverse operations. Another practice, ad-hoc, occurred during ‘Operation Charlie Hebdo’ and ‘Operation Paris’ in 2015 to search for Islamist Twitter accounts that preached violence in order to report them to the Twitter company so that it could take action such as closing the accounts.

Now that the aims and means of action done by Anonymous have been presented, a presentation of the current state of the art of the literature is given.

### 2.3. State of the art of the literature and contribution to the field

*might as well help you all the other phd theses are crap*

*Anon17*

Academics have approached Anonymous from the lenses of general ethnography, social and political thought, social movement theory, and organisation theory. Journalist Parmy Olson (2012) and ethnographer Gabriella Coleman (2014), the academic authority on Anonymous, give a holistic study of Anonymous, trying to grasp all aspects of the movement. Olsson presents a journalistic account and Coleman chose to write a popular ethnography, so that these works are not theoretically structured but follow a chronological, first-person experience, story-like narrative. Coleman refers to many theories and authors but seldom elects to develop on them. She also published three academic papers before the publishing of her book. She gives a holistic overview in a paper published on triple canopy (Coleman 2012). She and Michael Ralph replied to an article of the Financial Times which they think gave a skewed image of Anonymous (Coleman and Ralph 2011). They pointed out some internal dynamics and ideological tensions within Anonymous, the differences between Chanologists and Ubiquitous, notably the question of the legality of actions. In a book chapter, Coleman (2013a) considered the tension between Anonymous’ anti-celebrity ethics and the visibility in the media of its hacking and leaking campaigns. She also described the tension between the ideal of equalitarianism and the reality of the distri-

bution of power. Pendergrass (2013), also with a holistic stance, gives a comprehensive chronology of the events related to Anonymous from the birth of 4chan in 2003 to the year 2013.

Other authors have focused on specific traits of the movement. Bernstein et al. (2011) studied how 4chan's /b/ community can exist *despite* anonymity and extremely ephemeral content. Indeed, older literature finds that using real names or pseudonyms help to "promote trust, cooperation, and accountability (Millen and Patterson 2003), whereas anonymity may make communication impersonal and undermine credibility (Hiltz, Johnson, and Turoff 1986, Rains 2007)" (Bernstein et al. 2011, 50). It has also been claimed that archives can be useful tools for community consciousness. For instance online communities will often expect newcomers to read their archives (Millen 2000). Using a large dataset of more than five million posts, Bernstein et al. find that most threads stay five seconds on the first page and less than five minutes on the site before expiring. 90% of the content is posted by anonymous users. The authors hypothesise that the dynamism of the community is helped because ephemerality forces people to actively participate in the threads, so that these do not get deleted too fast (threads that have few answers disappear quickly). Concerning anonymity, it can be beneficial for the dynamism of the community because of its disinhibition effect. Also, the need to reach group status within the anonymous board can be accomplished through displaying the use of 4chan vernacular.

Beyer (2014) writes a comparative analysis of four online communities: 4chan, The Pirate Bay, the MMORPG (Mass Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) World of Warcraft, and the video game website IGN.com. She examines features that can explain why political mobilisation emerges from some communities but not others. 4chan and The Pirate Bay developed activism because they have 1) a high level of anonymity, 2) a low level of formal regulation and a high level of informal regulation, 3) low opportunities for small group interactions, and 4) conflicts between the social and legal norms of the community and those of the external world. Indeed, the techno-social apparatus of 4chan enforces anonymity. To assert membership status in the absence of recognisability, users answer to "extreme adherence to community practices and norms, while replacing individual identity markers with community symbols" (ibid., 46). It has at the same time a negative and a positive effect on group cohesion: because recognisability is taboo, as well as a mean to hurt if identity is discovered, 4channers cannot have offline interactions and the group is therefore less cohesive than in other internet communities. On the other hand, anonymity reinforces cohesion: "because being a distinct flower in the field of Anonymous daisies only leads to punishment, users have to adhere to a very strict code of behaviour and ritualized language, which means they are always monitoring their own discourse patterns" (47). This strong group cohesion, based on shared cultural practic-

es, norms and artefacts, is a solid foundation for the emergence of activism. Also, the lack of content regulation that results in the publication of unsavoury, shock value images and texts creates a boundary us/others that strengthens cohesion. The lack of meeting points for one-on-one or small group interaction helps to keep group cohesion as well. Learning to navigate within image boards is also relatively difficult compared to other community platforms, enhancing the us/them boundary. The ephemerality of threads and the lack of clear and comprehensive archives is another difficulty for newcomers who want to learn the social norms by looking at past discussions. Political activism drew on the experience from past collective actions (pranks) to give itself the confidence to begin to fight the CoS.

Nofia Fitri (2011) discusses the impact of Anonymous and other hacktivist movements on global politics and democracy. She concludes that hacktivism is a movement that promotes democracy and human rights. Gekker (2011) also looks at Anonymous' political effect and adopts a diametrically opposing position, namely that the actions of Anonymous can be detrimental to freedom of information. He draws a distinction between Anonymous and 'hackers' and why the former might stifle freedom of the internet while the latter fosters it. Gekker equates his notion of hacker with the 'tinkerer' of Steven Levy (1984), the curious engineer who likes to play with machines and give them new functions or better performance. The characteristics of hackers are their desire for unlimited access to information, disdain for authority and the hope to prove intellectual capability. The hacker's ideology has originally no political goal and hackers are not in strong conflict with those in power. Anonymous participants, by contrast, often bear direct political goals and acts on them. Their recourse to direct action alerts nation states on activist use of information and communication technologies, and in reaction they could seek more control of the net. Anonymous can therefore stifle freedom of information by inducing legal reaction.

Sauter (2013) studies Anonymous' DDoS attacks, their meanings and place within the history of hacktivism. While older hacktivist movements such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre used denial of service software as symbolic weapons for activism, Anonymous first used it as a means of direct action to directly hurt the target. Soon, the collective discovered that the press was drawn to this kind of attack, so that Anonymous learned to use it as an instrument of media manipulation. DDoS developed "from an *action-oriented* tactic to an *attention-oriented* tactic" (ibid., 985, author's emphasis). Fuchs (2013) analysed 67 YouTube videos to appreciate the political ideology of Anonymous. He found that both liberal and socialist worldviews are present—though liberalism has the upper hand—, that both sometimes co-exist, compete or complement each other. Klein (2015) examines the reception of Anonymous in the press. After analysing 200 articles in 10 countries, he finds that Anonymous is mostly framed as a group of malicious



pranksters, even though more than 80% of their actions have been motivated by political causes. Klein proposes that this stance is due to the conservative and pro-corporate ideology of traditional media.

Several authors look at Anonymous' organisation and the morphology of its tactics. The Imperva Corporation (2012) provides a detailed description of an Anonymous attack, particularly how small teams and crowd relate to one another. The attack Imperva studied occurred in three phases. There was a period of recruiting and communication, where a small group of Anons asked for support. Second, a dozen individuals attempted to penetrate website servers that would conceivably result in data leaks. In the third phase the group, being unsuccessful, asked for help from the wider community to perform a DDoS attack. Underwood and Welser (2011) describe the organisation of Anonymous during Project Chanology. They underline the decentralised and network form of the movement, its democratic and consensual decision-making process, the centrality of humour and memes for group cohesion, the entanglement between online and offline situations, and the accumulation of cultural capital to reinforce insider status. They also describe the 'marketing' techniques Anonymous uses to recruit. Using network contagion theory and modelisation with data gathered on an Anonymous wiki website, Underwood and Welser hypothesise that the low density of the Anonymous network and the high number of small clusters, such as geographic areas, explain its fast responsiveness, in contrast with organisations of high density and few clusters that would have been less responsive.

Milan (2013b) claims that Anonymous is an example of a new form of social movement organisation that she calls 'cloud protesting'. She embeds cloud protesting within an historical logic that comprises three phases of social movement organisations from the 1950s. The first phase is characterised by a centralised structure, such as workers' movements. The second arises with the global justice movement in the 1990s and sees the rise of affinity groups and informal networks. Cloud protesting, the third phase, relates to the recent waves of protests from 2010 onward, such as the Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, and Anonymous.

[It emerges with] the centrality of the internet and its tools as platforms for and arenas of collective action, the crucial role played by individuals, the move towards networked collective action at the expense of more traditional organizational forms, the centrality of the private and subjective experiences of individual activists, and the expressive and performative valence of action (Milan 2013b, 196).

Cloud protesting as a notion reflects the 'cloud' information technology that offers storage space and software through the internet. Cloud protesting uses a cloud structure to host 'soft' resources, the "set of ingredients enabling mobilization [...]—namely identities, narratives, meanings, and know-how"

(200). These resources are hosted on the cloud structure “composed of blogs, social networking and microblogging platforms, and other tools such as digital storytelling websites” (ibid.). Cloud logic has implications for the collective identity of a movement, as the individual’s agency, instead of the group, has a central position: the “representative function of the ‘we’” (ibid., 202) becomes almost irrelevant. What remains of collective identity is “the set of shared meanings that have survived the filter of the exercise of pooling together individual experiences” (ibid.). However, cloud protesting do generate strong networks, a grounded individual sense of belonging, and a strong collective identity rooted in the uniqueness of individuals.

Like Milan and her cloud protesting, Anonymous has inspired other academics to construct new concepts and exemplify others. In his article ‘Is Anonymous a New Form of Luddism?’, Deseriis (2013) introduces a critical comparison between Anonymous and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century English luddite movement. Both use a collective pseudonym, what Deseriis calls an “improper name” (ibid., 35). In contrast to a proper name, whose function is to fix a referent in all social situations, an improper name is unable to designate a clearly defined object. Rather, an improper name is explicitly constructed to obfuscate both the identity and number of its referents. An improper name has three main functions. On a first level, an improper name provides a medium for obfuscation and mutual recognition to its users. On a second level, it allows those who do not have a voice of their own to acquire a symbolic power outside the boundaries of an institutional practice. And on a third level, an improper name entails a certain level of publicity and dissemination, which detaches it from the initial conditions of its production and opens it to unpredictable appropriations and third-party usages. By linking actions that can be thematically unrelated, Deseriis claims that “the idiosyncratic uses of an improper name may signal the beginning of a process of social and political re-composition of which the name is a symbolic expression” (35). Indeed, Anonymous is the name of a movement that subverts the current political economy of informational capitalism. Anonymous resists the bifurcation—uncoupling in the production process—of data and metadata; data as end product and data about data, and the use of the latter for surveillance and biopolitical control (I suppose Deseriis uses the term biopolitics as the management of populations through pervasive techniques that regard everyday life). Anonymous resists this quantifying and modelling of social behaviour on the internet because of 4chan’s techno-social apparatus, which includes anonymity as the social norm and the technical working of the 4chan platform, where threads are ephemeral. Anonymous also attempts to disrupt biopolitical control by attacking organisations that censor information or limit its flow. Therefore they “expose the vulnerability of the corporate and state apparatus of control” (39) and undermine the artificial information scarcity imposed by informational capitalism.

Wiedemann (2014) uses Anonymous as an illustrative case for a general reflection on communities in the age of electronic networks that are not based on shared identities. She focuses on the notions of Tarde's public and affection. Wiedemann proposes that Anonymous is a "living network" (ibid., 322), a hybrid between Thacker's concepts of swarm and network, as well as similar to Negri and Hardt's Multitude. Stoeckel and Lindberg (2014) apply philosophical concepts to the Anonymous phenomenon. The *lulz* is a Spinozian "joyful passion" that produces Anonymous' "protest affect" (webpage, no pagination). Anonymous expresses a Mouffian agonistic action against hegemonic discourse. It reflects what Foucault calls the obligation for the international citizen to "speak out against every abuse of power". Mitchell (2013) uses the case of Anonymous trolls to give a reflection on subjectivation (as in subjection to norms) and on Butler's performativity, one mechanism of subjectivation. Anonymous trolls are a new, relative form of de-subjectivation, or transgressive subjectivation. Anonymous trolls free themselves from the guilt of their cruel actions (the 'guilty subject' in Nietzsche's work) through anonymity and group behaviour.

Finally, McDonald (2015) continues his work on collective identity, or rather its negation (see section 3.2) with an analysis of Indymedia and Anonymous. He remarks that Anonymous and the Occupy movement do not fit the 'common traits' and collective identity paradigm prominent in the 1990s, nor they be reduced by the 'networking practices' of Castells (1996), nor are they quite the same as the 'connective identity' of Bennet and Segerberg (2012). For McDonald new practices in the digital world, such as masking, the ephemeral and the grotesque call for new models of understanding.

Taken together, these studies provide a detailed account of Anonymous and propose several theoretical interpretations. A general criticism I would make is that most often the heterogeneity of Anonymous is not seriously considered, so that results might not apply to one part of Anonymous or another. It is the case for instance of Gekker (2011) who reduces Anonymous to hacktivists performing direct action, leaving the awareness raising campaigns aside. Generally, Anonymous' heterogeneity is either not mentioned or it is mentioned but in passing. It is not problematised, it is taken as a fact, while one of the reasons for this work is that it *is* a problem because it has not been seen before. None other 'improper names', as Deseriis (2013) call them, have ever been used to sign so widely different acts. The literature has covered a large part of the characteristics of Anonymous, but has not researched which ones were characterising how the participants defined themselves, at least not in a central and holistic concern. It is what I apply to do and many of those works are helpful as they refer to characteristics that are potentially self-defining. Coleman (2013a, 2014) has mentioned most of the topics that will be covered here (for instance the anti-celebrity ethics, the tolerance for others to use the name Anonymous, the trickster archetype and

the sense of justice). However, because of the popular ethnography style of her book, the descriptions lack depth and focus. Other authors write on themes that can potentially concern collective identity: Fuchs (2013) identifies the different political inclinations within the collective; Sauter (2013) underlines the frequent use of DDoS; Milan (2013b), Deseriis (2013), and Wiedemann (2014) identify or theorise the different types of organisation in the collective. All of these characteristics are considered as potential collective identity definitions and have been used to base the present model.

## 3. Theoretical background

This chapter presents the theoretical framework in which the aims, research question and analytical model are situated. It is divided into two sections. First, the concepts of social movements, identity and collective identity are presented, as well as the schools of thought of social movement theory, and the uses of collective identity in social movement theory. The second part presents the debates concerning identity and collective identity, the presence of collective identity on the internet, the existence of social movements on the internet, and the existence of collective identity in contemporary social movements.

### 3.1. Definitions and schools of thought

The first part concerns the definitions that have been given to the concept of social movement. An elaboration of Melucci (1996) definition is presented that will be useful during the analysis. Second, an account of the history of social movement studies and of its three main models (social psychology, structuralism, and social constructivism) is given. Third, the different definitions of identity and collective identity are presented. In the fourth part, how collective identity has been used in social movement studies is examined.

#### 3.1.1. Definitions of social movement and collective action

Definitions of social movement are numerous. As Opp (2009, 34) observes, they are often unclear and comparing them is not easy, as different terms can have the same meaning and vice versa. In addition, the various terms can refer to unrelated phenomena. Below, are four definitions that Opp presents in his review.

A social movement is a purposive and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structure (Zald and Ash 1966).

[Social movements are] effort[s] by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem that they feel they have in common (Toch 1965).

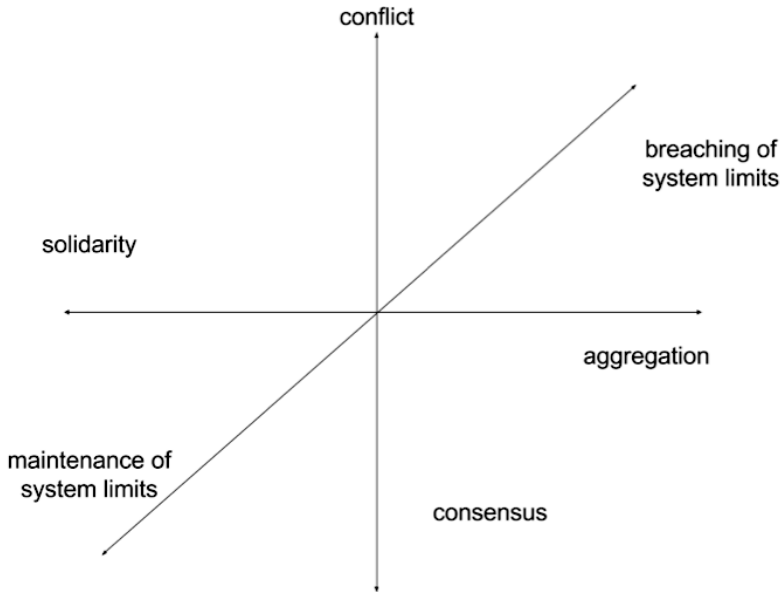
[Social movements] are better defined as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities (Tarrow and Tollefson 1998).

Social movements have traditionally been defined as organized efforts to bring about social change (Jenkins and Form 2005).

Opp finds four general features that most definitions share: a social movement is 1) a *group* with 2) a *goal*, the accomplishment of which is deterred by 3) the presence of an *antagonist*. The goal is attempted through 4. *collective action* (Opp 2009, 36-7). In their review of the literature, Snow and Oliver (1995, 571) find a similar conclusion: “most conceptualizations include the following elements: change-oriented goals; some degree of organization; some degree of temporal continuity; and some extra-institutional (e.g. protesting in the streets) and institutional (e.g. political lobbying) activity”.

One problem with these definitions is that the social movements that are answering to them are also partaking in actions that are extraneous to these definitions, which might cause problems of authentication. In the next paragraphs, one particular definition of social movements is described that has been developed by Alberto Melucci. This definition underlines the heterogeneity of the types of collective action that ‘social movements’ (following the definition of Opp (2009, 36-7)) perform, which will be useful in the analysis of Anonymus.

Melucci (1996, ch. 1) developed a definition that aims at revealing that what are often empirically described as social movements, for instance, the international peace and environmental organisation Greenpeace or the American animal’s rights PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) take part in a number of activities that are usually not considered as activism. His analytical differentiation of types of collective action is aimed at acknowledging this heterogeneity of actions partaken by groups that are often unambiguously but uneasily stifled into one group category (such as ‘social movement’ or ‘lobbyist group’). Melucci differentiates collective actions into analytical types that are formed by the modulation of three parameters. These parameters are called ‘polar orientations’ because each of them can take two forms. As figure 7 shows, the possibilities of orientation result in a typology of eight ( $2(\text{poles})^3(\text{parameters})$ ) types of collective action (the descriptive figures of these types are presented in Appendix 2). It has to be kept in mind that, empirically, collective actions are usually not so clear-cut as they “comprise a combination of these analytical dimensions: actors play many different games at the same time, and the task of the analysis is therefore to reveal the existence of this pluralism” (Melucci 1989, 30).



*Figure 7. Melucci's analytical differentiation of collective action types (see Appendix 2 for a figurative list of the eight types).*

The first orientation concerns whether collective action expresses a conflict against a dominant actor, or, on the contrary, if it expresses consensus on the state of social affairs (Melucci 1996, 24). The notion of conflict itself has three components: first it is the confrontation against an identified adversary. Second, it is a conflict over social resources. Resources can be material (e.g., wages) or they can be symbolic (e.g., the reputation of an organisation). The third component is that the collective identifies the adversary and the stakes at hand: it might fight for peculiar resources, but not understand its actions as such and not embedding them into a larger logic. It is the case for instance of the riots in French suburbs in October and November 2005, where the stakes at hand, such as social inequality and class domination, were not formulated. By contrast, collective actions based on consensus are performed based on rules previously agreed upon, as well as they tend to reinforce a state of social affairs. Rituals for instance (e.g., a Christian church mass), are based on consensus. They celebrate and nourish the social system.

The second orientation concerns the effect of a collective action towards what Melucci calls the “limits of compatibility of the system of social relationships” (Melucci 1996, 24), i.e. whether the collective action accepts the norms and rules of the social system, and in the case of political actions, the rules for conflict resolution. For instance, workers who attempt to get a higher wage by negotiating with their boss through their unions act within the boundaries of societal rules for conflict resolution: they are system-maintaining. By contrast, to kidnap a senior manager in order to pressure the

company board into accepting a wage increase is not an act included in the proper norms of conflict resolution and is therefore system-breaching. Activists, when they try to bring political change by protesting in the streets, act often within the boundaries of the law, yet they breach the limits of the system of parliamentary democracy because the latter only recognises political change through the election of representatives and their lobbying. System-breaching actions can also be performed in other fields than that of state politics. Actors can, for instance, be system-breaching at the level of social norms, with the experiment of alternative lifestyles such as living in communes (as opposed to nuclear families), the use of drugs, or the reclaiming of disproven sexual practices.

The third orientation pertains to whether a collective action shows either organisational solidarity or aggregation. Solidarity involves “the ability of actors to recognize others, and to be recognized, as belonging to the same social unit” (Melucci 1996, 23). In other terms, solidarity occurs when participants of a collective action recognise one another as acting as a group. By contrast, aggregation is the “temporal and spatial proximity of the repetitive multiplication of individual behaviour” (ibid.). Collective actions with an aggregative orientation do not involve solidarity but only express spatiotemporal contiguity between individual actions: “[T]hey can be broken down to the level of the individual without the loss of their morphological features; and they are wholly oriented towards the outside rather than towards the group” (ibid.). Aggregative orientation is the stuff of “crowd behaviour, panic, boom, craze, fashion” (31). For instance, “individual resistance” (ibid.) is an aggregative type of collective action that also bears system-breaching and conflictual orientations. One example is the succession of acts of sabotage in several factories that happened in the 1970s in Italy, where individual acts were performed without plotting or even awareness of others’ actions, but created the illusion of an organised movement (Negri 1979, 64-65, from Van De Donk et al. 2004, 71-72).

Melucci defines a social movement by the fact that it performs activist types of collective action. An activist action is conflictual, system-breaching, and showing solidarity. It attempts to bring social change through conflict against an actor with specified resources at stake. It does so through actions in which participants are aware that they act as a group. Finally, they act in ways that are not in accord with the norms of the system, specially concerning the norms pertaining to conflict resolution. Iterations of activist types of collective action are demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, workplace occupations, blockades, sabotage, property destruction, and civil disobedience among others.

While the defining quality of a social movement is the performance of activist actions, Melucci highlights the fact that social movements often perform other types of collective action that bring them closer to other forms of organisation. They can decide, for instance, to fight within the rules of the political game (conflict/system-maintaining/solidarity) and bring themselves



closer to the definition of a lobby group, a union, or a party. They can act outside of the political public sphere and create an alternative lifestyle (consensus/system-breaching/aggregation). They can decide to perform cooperative types of collective action (consensus/system-maintaining/solidarity) and become a support group or a charity. Finally, they can defend part of the social order, enforce dominant moral norms, and execute laws through illegitimate violence and other forms of coercion (consensus/system-breaching/solidarity) to become a group of vigilantes. Many social movements perform several of these collective action types. Greenpeace carries out direct actions (such as shutting down a UK coal fired power station in 2007 (Martin 2011)). They can also play the role of lobbyist, attempting social change by legitimate means (Greenpeace spent 36,000 USD on the American congress in 2013 (opensecret.org 2016)). It also carries out vigilante actions, such as when Greenpeace Zodiacs blockaded harpoon ships to prevent them from illegally hunting whales (Greenpeace 2014).

Anonymous is a collective that does not limit itself to acts of activism. Anonymous can also be a counterculture, a lobbyist, a vigilante, and a charity, as described later. Therefore, its collective identity cannot be limited to the characteristics of its activist actions. In the next section, different academic schools of thought concerned with the study of social movements are presented.

### 3.1.2. Social movement theory.

Lofland (1993, 37) argues that social movement studies are prone to “theory-bashing”, the act of strongly attacking one’s opponent model without considering its possible contribution to the field, as well as its usefulness in one’s own research. This theory-bashing is related to the fact that social movement studies is a busy, multi-disciplinary field comprised of different theoretical schools that are harshly competing for paradigmatic dominance. To the risk of formulating a cliché, these schools study social movements from different epistemological angles and should be considered more complementary than antithetical. Three traditions within the social sciences have contributed to the field: social psychology, structuralism, and constructivism. In the same order, each has enjoyed dominance in its own time. I draw on Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009) review of the field for this section.

#### **Social psychology**

The ancestry of social movement theory can be identified within the French school of mass psychology, active from about 1880 to 1910. Taine, Tarde, and Lebon are the prominent figures of this movement (Fillieule and Péchu 1993, ch. 1). Basing their analysis on the French revolution mobs, they see collective action as a “mutual contagion” (ibid., 27) of feelings that triggers irrational crowd behaviour: the individual loses her rationality when emo-

tionally infected by the crowd. This point of view seemingly reflects the fear of the lower classes and of the possibility of other revolutions in the bourgeoisie of the time.

This idea of the irrational actor and the mob remains influential in the 'breakdown theory movement', dominant in the academia until the 1970s, notably through the works of Smelser (1963) and Blumer and Shibutani (1973). Breakdown theory sees activist collective action as a symptom of societal strain and change as a result of accelerated modernisation and economic instability (Useem 1998). People act out of grievance, despair, and anomie. Actions are spontaneous and irrational. Hoffer (1951) depicts the activists as desperate people who need to believe in something. It attracts "the poor, misfits, outcasts, minorities, adolescents, [...] the bored, the sinners" (ibid., 25).

### **Structuralism**

During the 1960s, the considerable growth of social movement activity in a context of strong economic redistributive growth led some scholars to discard breakdown theory. Social movements begin to be considered not as an anomaly of political life, but as part of it (see, e.g., McAdam (2010) in his work on black insurgency). Two trends appeared: resource mobilisation theory and political process theory. The first is concerned with the internal structure of social movement organisations and the other with the movement's relationships with the rest of the social system, specially the state.

Resource mobilisation focuses on the gathering and use of resources by social movements. Resources can be material or unsubstantial: money, labour, goods, but also authority, leadership, skills, and so on. Resource mobilisation theory looks at how social movements seek, gather, or invest in these resources, as well as how they handle and use them. The availability of these resources and the organisations that process these resources explain the rise and fall of social movements. From this approach, actors are seen as rational, organised, and professional; they strategically plan well-coordinated actions to achieve social change (Smith and Fetner 2010). Gamson (1990) looks at the external ties constructed by social movement and shows that social movements that build connections with political powers and lobbies are more successful than those who only performed demonstrations.

Political process theory looks at the political and institutional environment surrounding a social movement. The political structures of a nation influence the characteristics of social movements (Tilly 1984). The relationship and parleys between a social movement and the state are a central concern: whether the state accepts and implements the demands of the social movements serves as evaluation of the success of the movement. Eisinger (1973) found that the relationships between the political openness of a city and the emergence of social movements take the form of an inverted U shape: "if a city is extremely open to input from political outsiders, this will

suppress social movements by rendering them unnecessary. At the other extreme, a very closed system will also suppress social movement activity” (Klandermans and Roggeband 2007, 16). As in resource mobilisation theory, in political process theory the actors are usually seen as rational and instrumental. They seek agreements and coalitions with political elites and participate in intensive lobbying.

### **Social constructivism**

Social constructivism is a school of thought that studies social interactions to understand how shared meanings (i.e. the common understandings of the world) are created (Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009, 18-19). The social-constructivist or cultural approach to social movements arises out of the criticism that structural theories shape the activist in the image of a simplified homo economicus (or economic man): rational, calculating, goal oriented, and instrumental. This is not what ethnographers experienced in the field (ibid.). Passion and ideals were, at least on the surface, the first qualities seen in activists. Furthermore, the political process theory became irrelevant to new kinds of social movement that burgeoned during the 1960s. These were not focussed on asking the state for legal change, but sought for a direct transformation of society through the recognition of alternative identities and lifestyles: peace, anti-nuclear, gay, feminist, local-autonomy movements, and so on (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 286).

For the social-constructivist approach, how activists construct their meanings together, how they make sense of themselves and of the world around them are important parameters to consider for social movement research (Jasper 2010). Framing theory (Benford and Snow 2000), a bridge between structuralism and constructivism, is the first model to use this cultural approach. Framing is defined as a process of meaning-construction (often in the form of public communication) targeted to participants, opponents, and the greater public. In framing theory, it is often treated as a tactical move, targeting internal homogenisation and successful relationships with the outside. In doing so, framing theory looks at meanings, but retains the instrumental approach of structuralism (Johnston 2009, 3). Since then, many works have abandoned this instrumental interpretation. Much of the literature has taken concern with the construction of cultural codes, rituals, artefacts, practices, and emotions with no particular shared theoretical model (Jasper 2010, Williams 2004, Salman and Assies 2010).

I will explain how these schools of thought relate to my own analytical model in section 5.1. The next section focuses on the concept of identity and collective identity. First I define the different types of identity usually agreed upon that are personal identity, social identity, and collective identity. Then I show how the concept of collective identity has been interpreted and used in social movement studies.

### 3.1.3. Definitions of identity

The notion of identity became popular in the social sciences during the 1950s with the introduction of the concept by developmental psychologist Erik H. Erikson, who at the time was studying how individuals evolved and constructed their identity through consecutive life stages (adolescence, parenthood, etc.) (Erikson 1950). The concept was progressively adopted by a number of academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, political science, and philosophy. Despite the apparent obviousness of the meaning (identity is “what a thing is” as Gleason (1983, 911) states), identity is a vague concept and has been used to bear multiple significations. In their review of the literature, Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2011, 4) attempted to formulate an integrated definition of identity:

[I]dentity consists of the confluence of the person’s self-chosen or ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and beliefs about herself; roles and positions in relation to significant others; and her membership in social groups and categories (including both her status within the group and the group’s status within the larger context).

Let us break down this definition. Identity is considered as designating three types of *content*. Next to each type of content is attached a specific *process* by which identities are formed. Content and process of a same type are usually studied together, but combinations are not analytically impossible. Finally, these different types of identity are not independent of one another but can intersect and interact.

First, *individual* or *personal identity* refers to the aspects of an individual’s *self-definition*, how she considers herself to be, as well as the qualities she gives to herself. These qualities are internalised ideas that can be goals, values, beliefs, standards for behaviour, self-esteem and self-evaluation, among others (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011, 3). The process attached to individual identity content lies at the psychological level, and research usually emphasises the agency of the individual during the formation or the discovery of her identity.

Second, *social* or *relational identity* refers to the many *roles* a social system assign to the individual, such as the role of a child, spouse, co-worker, parent, or customer. Research on the process of social identity construction focuses on how social structures assign these roles, as well as how they are secured and confirmed through social interaction.

Finally, *collective identity* refers to people’s *identification* with a group or a social category. These groups and categories can be ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, families, work groups, social movements, etc. Students of processes of collective identity formation look at interactions between individuals of the same collective to see how they communally construct collective identity definitions. An important differentiation with social identities is

that collective identities, as active constructs, not only permit but also invite collective action, which explains why collective identity is easily found in social movements

These three types of identity are analytically differentiated, but empirically they are intricately related, so that an understanding of the identity of an individual goes through the study of all of them and their interrelationships.

So far, I have described this tripartite categorisation of identity from a *subjective point of view*, i.e. with the individual as the point of focus. Types of identity can also be defined from an *objective point of view*, i.e. to look at the attributes of identity. These can be the notions of doctor, husband, Caucasian, middle class, etc. They are not just analytical constructs because these ideas have empirical effects: an individual who has been assigned an identity category is subjected to its general understanding and is expected to behave as such, both from the social system and peer groups, and eventually oneself.

An objective study of collective identity would then be a study of the meaning of the notion of the collective. Beyond this general idea, there is no agreed-upon definition of collective identity in the literature (Holland, Fox, and Daro 2008). The next section presents the wide use of the concept in social movement studies.

### 3.1.4. Uses of collective identity in social movements

During the 1970s, resource mobilisation theory and political process theorists focused on how social movements secured the resources to influence the political system. These models became ill-suited to understand the rise of new social movements that focused on peace, nuclear energy, local autonomy, homosexuality, and feminism because these were not seeking political concessions from the state, but rather recognition for new identities and lifestyles.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) state that the notion of collective identity was then called to answer four questions. First, it could shed light on why social movements emerged. Resource mobilisation and political process theories could not explain why some issues were very mobilising in some countries but not in others, such as abortion that was a strong topic of mobilisation in the United States but not in Europe. The second question concerned how movements choose their organisation and tactics, which were sometimes in contradiction with what should have been the behaviour of a rational actor. They could be explained as defining properties that were more important to sustain than instrumental considerations (Lichterman 1996). The third question referred to the cultural effects of social movements, i.e. how social movements changed the collective identity of a given group and its reception

by the outside. The last question pertained to why individuals were joining social movements in the first place.

Following these different problematics, the concept of collective identity came to designate a very broad range of phenomena, such as “the social categories predominating among activists (say ‘women’ or ‘animal rights activists’), public representations of social categories [...], activists’ shared definition of their situation, the expressive character of all action, the affective bonds that motivate participation, the experience of solidarity within movements, and others.” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 284-5).

It is therefore difficult to find a definition of collective identity that would satisfy all the uses the concept has been put to in academic writing. However, some main similarities and differences can be found. First, there are two different understandings of collective identity that are often implicit: either the identity of a collective is made based on the shared traits of its members (shared grievance, ethnic background, or the taste in the same tactics (Cerulo 1997a, 386)), or it can be composed of other traits independent of the members. In this latter understanding the actors recognise emergent properties to the social movement, its organisation becoming a part of its collective identity (DiMaggio 1997, 274).

Second, collective identity has been studied from three perspectives: the subjective and objective perspective, which were defined in the previous section, and an intersubjective perspective, which focuses on the construction of definitions through the (usually discursive) interactions among participants. Most studies use several or all of these views, but usually give more weight to one perspective than the others .

Concerning the subjective perspective, one can cite Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) review of the literature that identifies the main cognitive elements that have been associated with collective identity, such as self-categorisation (to identify oneself as a member of a particular social group), behavioural involvement (the degree to which the person engages in actions related to the collective identity in question), or narrative (“the internally represented story that the person has developed regarding self and the social category in question”) (ibid., 83). A good example of a strong focus on the objective perspective is Taylor (1989) study of how the definitions of feminist collective identity could survive the death of its social movement and be revived and passed on to future generations of feminists. Concerning studies strongly focusing on the intersubjective process of collective identity, one can cite Gould (1998) who studied the structure of the networks of patronage during the 1791 Whiskey rebellion in the United States, and how it permitted collective action through the creation of a common sense of identity.

While models of collective identity that are applied to social movement are numerous, it is worthy to mention Taylor and Whittier (1992) who de-

veloped an influential model that has often been used to study collective identity. In this model, collective identity is analytically divided into three components: boundaries, consciousness, and negotiations. Boundaries refer to the construction of a we/them demarcation, a cognitive differentiation between the challenging group and the dominant structure. Activists invest in “boundary framing” (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994, 193) that designates a strong ‘other’, an enemy, as well as assigning other social movement organisations to different “ideological, geographical and tactical ‘turf’” (ibid., 443). Consciousness refers to the construction and expression of shared ideas that describe a social movement. They are constructed at the aftermath of collective actions through a variety of mechanisms, including talk, narratives, framing processes, emotion work, and interactions with antagonists (Hunt and Benford 2004, 445). Negotiation, finally, is the creation of new ideas and cultural artefacts that gives to an oppressed group the means to resist the dominant culture. Though it has been successfully applied several times (Ayers (2003), Ghose et al. (2008) and Nip (2004) notably), Taylor and Whittier’s model cannot be applied to Anonymous because it is made for social movements related to identity politics, the advancement of a specific population, social identity, or lifestyle.

Now that the working concepts have been identified and their use in the academic field has been mapped, attention is turned towards the main debates that have emerged concerning them.

## 3.2. Main debates on identity and collective identity

This section locates the aims, research question, and analytical model of the present work in front of several issues related to identity, collective identity, and the relationships between collective identity, social movements, and the internet. First, I present three debates concerning identity and collective identity: can we talk about one or several identities and collective identities? From where do they emerge? Are they stable or fluid? Second, the debates on the existence of collective identity in internet communities, the existence of digitally-exclusive social movements (those who only use the internet as a means of communication), and the existence of collective identity in social movements enabled by electronic social media are highlighted.

### 3.2.1. Debates concerning identity and collective identity

#### **Origins of identity**

Opinions diverge as to whether individual identity is discovered, socially constructed, or personally constructed (Waterman 1984). In the first case, it is implied that an essence, a ‘true self’ or potential exist prior to its discov-

ery, and that one's quest is to find that self and actualise the potentials. A pure constructivist approach, on the other hand, considers that identity is built where it did not exist in the first place. Integrative attempts, such as Swartz (2002), consider that self-construction represents the *path* to self-discovery—the Nietzschean 'become what you are'. Within the constructivist approach, personal constructivism underlines the individual's efforts to construct her own identity, whereas social constructivism focuses on the role of social structures in constraining the individual to choose between a limited number of options. Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2011) claim that individuals have the agency to choose what they want to become but might be constrained by society to become someone else. Sociologies of social reproduction, with the work of Bourdieu (2007) as its flagship, dismiss this line of thought and underline that most often seemingly agential choices of identity construction are already preprogrammed by the individual's location within the social structure.

The same question applies to collective identity, although in slightly different terms. There are three interpretations with respect to the modalities of emergence of collective identity: primordialism, social structuralism, and social constructivism (Snow 2001, no pagination). Primordialism and structuralism are essentialist perspectives positing that the identity of a collective flows directly from an underlying characteristic. From the primordialist point of view, the defining characteristic is usually an attribute such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or a deep, underlying psychological disposition. The structuralist perspective considers that the attribute is usually a master social category, such as class, ethnicity, or nationality, or the belonging to a large structure (e.g., an organisation or a company). Individuals who share essential traits are presumed to own a collective identity or at least to have strong potential for such.

The constructivist perspective sees presumed links between identities and essential characteristics as uncertain or insufficient for understanding. Instead, focus is directed towards the construction (and maintenance) of collective identities: "collective identities are seen as invented, created, reconstituted, or cobbled together rather than being biologically preordained or structurally or culturally determined" (Snow 2001). So far, empirical studies have provided considerable support for the constructivist interpretation. First, the 'radical' essentialist interpretation that mechanically links collective identities with primordial or structural attributes, with no other parameters, is contradicted by observations showing that members of the same categories often bear different degrees of identification and commitment to the collective. Also, people bear several social identities that are differentially invoked depending on the situation or in relation to one another. These differentials show the need for other variables to make sense of the emergence of collective identity. Finally, much of the empirical evidence is consistent with the constructivist argument: one can cite Trevor-Roper (1983) account



of the retrospective invention of the Highland culture and tradition, a “nineteenth century reification of a people that never existed” (James 1999, 136). If collective identities can be constructed from nothing, the refutation of mechanistic essentialist interpretations should not eliminate the role of primordial and structural roots in the formation of many collective identities. Buechler (2000) therefore argues that collective identity should be understood in terms of a continuum, with structurally given identities at one end and collective identities that are formed from ‘scratch’ at the other. Collective identity theorists hypothesise that this is especially likely to happen when a group lacks an easily identifiable common social location in a class or ethnic group (Gamson 1992, 40).

### **Singularity of identity**

Should we use the concept of identity in the singular or plural level? At the individual level, psychology tends to consider identity as a unitary concept with subdivisions, while social psychology and sociology consider an individual to be at cross points between multiple radials of social identity concepts that position the individual within the social system. Psychology usually implies the phenomenological observation that, to say nothing of schizophrenics and during periods of identity crisis (when a person senses she has two or more identities and fail to reconcile these into one unitary sense of self (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011, 6)), humans generally feel they are a unitary consciousness. However, most authors concede the existence of different components constituting one’s identity. Every person can indeed describe herself in different ways—a father, a Christian, a software programmer, etc. Social psychology and sociology, on the other hand, are less interested in individual perceptions and concentrate on the multiple roles given to an individual by society: identity is always plural. Eventually, whether one talks of an individual identity with different components or an individual with different identities is a definitional issue (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011, 6).

If one shifts focus from the individual as object of research to the social categories as objects of research (nationality, ethnicity, football teams, etc.), the notion of social identity is used at the singular level, but is also treated as a ‘diversity within unity’ concept: social identities are considered as general understandings, but such understandings can differ at the level of sub-groups and individuals. When it comes to collective identities, the question is linked with the stance on the origins of collective identity. Primordialists and structuralists tend to consider that a social movement’s identity cannot trespass the realm of possibilities given by its essence and that if there is construction of a collective identity, it will be the path for the discovery of its essence (Marx being the perfect example of such an interpretation with his concept of class *in itself* and class *for itself*). In the social constructivist perspective,

collective identity is used at the singular level as a set of characteristics arising out of interactions between members.

In social movement studies, this unitarian supposition has been criticised. Some authors have pointed out that the conception of the collective identity of a movement can change from one individual or one sub-group to another. Gamson (1991) explains that different collective identities can exist on three embedded layers: organisational, movement, and solidary. The first layer is the collective identity developed between individuals of a same network or group within a movement. The second layer concerns the identity of the movement as a whole. A third layer exists on the level of the whole community or social group that the social movement defends. Saunders (2008, 231) denies the existence of collective identity on a social movement level, unless “we choose to water down our definition of a collective identity until it becomes virtually meaningless” (ibid, 249). However, her definition of social movement is very broad: she studies three different and unrelated environmental organisations as a whole. Rupp and Taylor (1999) studied the ‘feminist movement’ on a similar scale (different social movement organisations) and by contrast find that even with the development of strong and diverse collective identities, the main feminist international SMOs of the twentieth century together constructed a common collective identity based on gender essentialism and all-women associations (ibid., 376). Flesher Fominaya (2010b) found that the collective identity of other global justice movements focuses on ‘anti-identitarianism’, which promotes diversity, heterogeneity, and rejects ideological purity and fixed identities. Finally, relations between movement-level and group-level collective identities can take other modalities, and it seems there are no general rules. Studying the autonomous movements in the anti-globalisation network in Madrid, for instance, Flesher Fominaya (2007) discovered that sub-groups can consider others as not bearing the collective identity of the movement, while all reclaim from it. Last, individuals can also feel part of a global movement even if they don’t identify themselves with a sub-group (Gamson 1991, 40).

### **Stability of identity**

Another debate is whether identities are largely stable and fixed or fundamentally unstable and in constant flux. Developmental psychologists tend to view identity as relatively fixed, with processes of change occurring during specific parts of the life span (e.g., adolescence), or exceptional and traumatic circumstances (e.g., the loss of a self-defining job that pushes the individual to redefine herself in order to retain psychological integrity). Social-psychological approaches, in contrast, focus on short-term and contextual fluctuations in identity. Social identities indeed fluctuate in salience depending on the context individuals find themselves. For instance, they would rather express their identity of being an academic while giving a lecture, and their identity of science fiction enthusiast during Star Trek conventions.

Some approaches to identity studying short-term social interactions go further and affirm that individuals construct their identities as they go along, where “identities are nothing more than discursive devices that people can use to help themselves accomplish interactional goals” (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011, 10). For these authors, such views can be reconciled. First, seemingly stable parts of an identity might be so because of constant processes of subjectivation, such as the identity of being a good father being reinforced with the constant care of the child. Second, studies have shown that salience from one situation to the next is relatively predictable in function of the habitus of the individual and of the limited number of situations she can be in (Turner and Onorato 1999).

Finally, the epistemological divide long-term/stability versus short-term/fluidarity should be superseded and viewed as a difference in emphasis instead of a difference in phenomena. When it comes to collective identity, the opinion of academics is related to their view on the modalities of emergence of collective identity. Essentialists will consider that collective identities, once formed, do not move away too much from a pattern already weaved by primordial or structural roots. Constructivists and academics using hybrid models usually consider collective identity as changing during a lifetime. Collective identity processes do not stop once identity is formed, and it has to be ever-present in order to sustain collective identity. This dynamism most often entails evolution and change.

### 3.2.2. Collective identity and social movement on the internet

#### **Collective identity in internet communities**

‘Collective identity’ is barely used in studies dealing with groups interacting on the internet. The concepts of collective identity presented above are present but mostly referred to in such terms as *community* (Rheingold 1993), *subcultures* (Williams and Copes 2005), or *culture* (Bell 2001). The question of whether communities situated solely on the internet can be considered as having the same qualities as ‘in real life’ (IRL) communities have been the object of a polarised debate.

Song (2009, 18) recalls that during the early years of the internet, computers were seen as dehumanising, which supposedly influenced researchers in their idea of computer-mediated communication. Calhoun (1991) argues against giving the label ‘community’ to digital relationships. Indirect social relationships (such as computer-mediated ones) only give the illusion of a real connection. The ability of the internet to broaden the capacities for reaching people only gives rise to “imagined communities”, which in essence is no more than a fake individual feeling of belonging to a group. A ‘real’ community, however, requires direct, ‘face-to-face’ relationships and identification (Reid 1994, Walther and Burgoon 1992, Wellman et al. 1996).

Along the same line, Beniger (1987) declares that internet communities are unable to offer genuine personal relationships to their users. Social bonding is weak because of the lack of intimacy and self-disclosure. Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) agree with Parsons (1951) assertion that communities need the actors to know one another's identity. Because "[...] there is ample documentation of presentations of false selves, role playing, gender swapping, and so on..." (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999, 243), anonymity leads to deception and manipulation and thus cannot foster the emergence of a good public sphere (Rice 1984, Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984, Baron 1984, Schmitz 1997, Reid 1994).

Authors such as Cerulo (1997b) have duly noted these criticisms and argue that they come from conceptions of social interactions that epistemologically hinder one's ability to grasp what virtual communities really are. Mediated interactions have generally been viewed as spurring "superficial bonding, isolation, and in extreme cases, anomie" (ibid., 52). They are often described as "impersonal, ingenious, and fleeting" (ibid., 49), whereas face-to-face interactions are considered more profound and intimate. "Physical co-presence provides the standard by which to judge the importance [...] of all other varieties of exchange" (ibid.). But because more and more publications (at the time of Cerulo's writing) show how emotionally strong and intimate computer-mediated communications can be, face-to-face interactions have to be decentred from its standard position and be put on the same level as mediated ones.

One of the first scholars to have studied internet-mediated communities and has given them a more positive review is Howard Rheingold (1993, 1999). He transcribes his experience of virtual communities in enthusiastic terms. To him, the virtual community can be described "a bit like a neighbourhood pub or coffee shop" (1999,414):

In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual intercourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when they get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities [...] (ibid.).

From people meeting because of shared interests, communities are formed through the construction of a collective identity, which goes parallel to the formation of a gift economy based on knowledge exchange (Rheingold 1993, 5). Rheingold's enthusiasm is to be linked with the hypothesis that late modern societies (The periodisation is imprecise, Putnam (2000, 16) talks of "the last several decades of the twentieth century") have a tendency to anomie because of the gradual disappearance of spaces of sociality (Putnam 2000). Online communities would replace those community groups that had

disintegrated during this period (Rheingold 1999, 415-421, Oldenburg 1989). People would then move *en masse* to the internet because of their longing for community (Bell 2001, 99). For Rheingold, the formation of virtual communities is not just easy and possible, but it is inevitable as people strive to avoid a state of anomie.

Several authors have followed this optimistic view. Hiltz (1993), Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984), Baron (1984), and Walther (1992) state that pseudonymity and lack of visual cues resolve the problem of discrimination and foster trust and care. Miller and Slater (2000), Van Gelder (1991), Baym (1995), Turkle (2011) affirm that internet communities can foster self-esteem and the formation of a collective identity for stigmatised minorities. Parks and Roberts (1998), Parks and Floyd (1996), Walther (1996) argue that online communities support unprejudiced communications that are more fair than face-to-face interactions (For a more thorough review on the matter, see Song (2009), ch. 2).

### **The existence of social movements exclusively using the internet as a means of communication.**

Like the concept of community a few years ago, the idea of mostly or exclusively internet-mediated social movements is mostly denied at the time of this writing. Academics have praised the internet for augmenting the capacities of social movements such as increased speed of communication; allowing a faster reactivity to events; increased interactions between different chapters of the same social movements and between individuals, which allows for more horizontal decision-making processes; the possibility to connect geographically dispersed actors but with the same grievance, which enhances the chances of mobilisation; enhanced capacities for propaganda and recruitment, easier communication between distant activists, as well as between different social movements, fostering coalitions and concerted events; accuracy of communications and less distortions because of the redundancy of the written form of messages and of intermediaries (Bonchek 1995, Myers 1994, Rheingold 1993, ch. 8, from Diani 2000, 388).

However, the literature generally discards the possibility of the existence of social movements that only or mostly use the internet for internal communications. Criticisms are usually of the same nature as of those that were criticising the possibility of online communities. Laer (2010, 406) affirms that as “a weak tie instrument by excellence (Kavanaugh et al. 2005), the internet may be found insufficient to create a sustainable network of activists, endangering the maintenance and coordination of future social movement organizations [...]”. Referring to the work of Turkle (1997) on multiple identities on the internet, Hakken (1999, 96) asserts that because collective action “has been built on shared sense of identity”, the formation of internet-based social movements is difficult, even more that “the time it takes to cultivate the multiples identities described by Turkle might lessen entities’ ca-

pacities to participate in social movements” (ibid.). Only Donk and Foederer (2001, 192) consider the possibility of exclusively digitally mediated social movements, but still “doubt that virtual demonstrators can do without the emotions and thrills of participating in real direct actions” (192).

### **The presence of a collective identity in digitally enabled social movements**

As mentioned in section 3.1.4, the notion of collective has been used to explain why people join social movements. For Snow (2001), collective identities differentiate themselves from social identities, notably because they permit ‘collective agencies’, which means that they not only permit but also invite collective action. Several studies found that collective identities facilitate commitment “by enhancing the bonding to leadership, beliefs systems, organisation, rituals, cohorts networks, and localities” (Hunt and Benford 2004, 448). The idea that collective identity is actually needed for the development of social movements has become pervasive. Gamson (1991), for instance, studying identity building in social movements protesting United States military interventions in Vietnam and El Salvador, concludes that “any movement that seeks to sustain commitment over a period of time must make the construction of collective identity one of its most central tasks”. Taylor and Whittier (1992) corroborate this claim in their study of feminist movements: “collective action cannot occur in the absence of a ‘we’ characterised by common traits and specific solidarity [...] A collective actor cannot exist without reference to experiences, symbols and myths which form the basis of its individuality” (87).

However, several works have been critical of the claim to existence of collective identity in contemporary social movements, and notably when they are enabled by electronic platforms of communication. Ayers (2003) uses Taylor and Whittier (1992, 105, 109) typology of collective identity characteristics to compare one offline and one online group of feminist activists. He does not find any sign of collective identity in the online group: there is no shared definition of the group in terms of place in the broader society; there is no strong shared view of an external opponent; and there is no group consciousness and no plan for social change. The lack of collective identity ends up with the inability for the movement to be active politically. Ayers does not pretend to generalise his findings. Still, he thinks that the formation of collective identity might have been difficult because of geographical distance between members (Ayers 2003, 161). ‘Real world’ action should also be present: “an online social movement group must have some level of activism in the ‘real world’ if the changes it seeks politically are to go beyond of the internet itself” (ibid.).

McDonald (2001, 2002, 2004) is the most virulent author against the notion of collective identity offline and online. To him, the theory of collective identity has become a “new orthodoxy” (2001, 2), but is now a “conceptual

liability” (2002, 124). He sees several symptoms in the global justice movement of the 1990s that attest to this obsolescence: the disappearance of a hierarchical structure replaced by a horizontal one; the absence of the symbolic expression of collective identity such as flags and banners; the disappearance of spokespersons; and the development of affinity groups, which fixes the individual not in a relationship with the whole of a movement but directly and concretely with other individuals.

Activists are now acting to construct and preserve their own identity: “[activism] is not [...] about the struggle to construct a collective identity, but about ‘finding your place’” (McDonald 2002, 121). Collective action is not anymore a matter of constructing collective identity, but rather of forming an individual “public expression of the self” (ibid., 111). They become “experience movements” and “movements of expression” (2004, 589). Experience movements rely on the motivation of activists to see “oneself as another”, to be recognised as a particular individual and see the resemblances and differences with other people. It is not an ‘I’ who encounters a ‘we’ (as in his concept of collective identity), but an ‘I’ meeting other ‘I’s. When it comes to Anonymous, McDonald (2015) considers that it cannot be understood in terms of collective identity either. New analytical models have yet to be formed to understand its main characteristics, such as masking, the ephemeral and the grotesque.

The work of Bennett and Segerberg (2012) on digitally enabled collective action has been discussed in relation to collective identity (Bakardjieva 2015, Gerbaudo 2014). Though the authors affirm that their work is not directly related to it (private conversation with Dr. Segerberg), I think their research sheds light on types of solidarity that are alternatives to some interpretations of collective identity. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 743) make a historical distinction between a former logic of *collective action* to a current logic of *connective action* enabled by digital social media. The first is “associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities” while the latter is “based on content sharing across media networks” (ibid., 739). It shows a very different logic of motivation and organisation: “connective action networks are typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities” (750). Collective identity tends to be replaced with “personalized identity” by which individuals perform through their own interpretation of the movement and through personal grievances: “People may still join actions in large numbers, but the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression rather than through common group or ideological identification” (744). In the end, the very notions attached to the concept of social movement have to be re-thought if any sense is to be made of the recent waves of protest.

Efforts to push these kinds of organization into recognizable social movement categories diminish our capacity to understand one of the most interesting developments of our times: how fragmented, individualized populations that are hard to reach and even harder to induce to share personally transforming collective identities somehow find ways to mobilize protest networks (751).

Both McDonald and Bennett and Segerberg seem to have a conception of collective identity as constructed by a central and managing organisation, and then imposed to the rest of the social movement. This is a peculiar take on collective identity in that social constructivists usually consider collective identity to be constructed by the whole movement: for instance, Melucci (1995), Snow (2001), or more recently Flesher Fominaya (2010b) in her study of the global justice movement in Spain. We return to this topic in the general conclusion.

Milan (2015), on the contrary, thinks that electronic platforms are a fertile ground for the development of the collective identity in social movements.

All told, social media contribute to change the terms of identity building. By providing always on platforms in which interactions are practiced on a recurring basis, they amplify the ‘interactive and shared’ properties of collective action. In other words, they continuously activate the relationships that maintain collective identity and joint action [...]. They foster an extension of activism, and of the collective experience in particular, into the private sphere of individuals and their quotidian, strengthening the symbolic nexus between activism and personal life. (893)

Milan (2013a) uses McDonald’s concept of experience movement but reinterprets it as a collective identity component. She considers that the shared characteristics of hacktivists’ personal experience constitute the collective identity of the movement. This emphasis on the individual experience comes from three factors. First, they share an individualistic culture. Second, they also have an agenda that is not recognised as important in the public sphere (e.g., freedom of information). Most important, technical expertise is owned at the individual level and activist actions are performed individually in a relationship between the individual and the computer. What is at the core of the collective identity is the shared *experience of the action* (Milan 2013b, 201).

### 3.3. Conclusion

This chapter presented the theoretical background of the present dissertation by defining the main concepts, describing how they have been used in the academia, and the main scholarly debates they have been the topic of.



The notion of social movement and collective identity have both been defined in different terms. Definitions of social movements usually share the idea that a social movement is a group driven by social change that performs collective action against an antagonist (Opp 2009, 36-7). Melucci (1996) argues that social movement organisations perform collective actions that often go beyond what we consider as activist actions, so that they often act in similar ways as lobby groups, charities, vigilantes, and countercultures.

The concept of collective identity has been used so broadly that constructing an encompassing definition is hardly feasible. However, from a subjective standpoint, it has been regarded as the personal attachment of an individual to a group. From an objective view, it has been seen to be either made of the shared characteristics of the individuals forming the collective—the possibility and cause of formation if a collective identity is attached to these shared features—or the recognition, from the members of the group, of emergent properties of the collective itself. In the social constructivist tradition, authors have also focused on the intersubjective perspective of collective identity, i.e. the construction of collective identity definitions through interactions between participants.

Social movements have been studied by three successive schools of thought: social psychology, structuralism, and social constructivism. Social psychology has focused on crowd behaviour as well as personal grievances. Within structuralism, resource mobilisation looked at the handling of resources by social movement organisations, whereas political process theory concerned itself with their relationships with other institutions, particularly the state. Within the social constructivist tradition, collective identity in social movements has been used to understand why social movement emerged, why individuals were participating in social movements, why they used some tactics and types of organisation, and how they changed commonly understood meanings within society.

The concepts presented above have been objects of debates. Concerning collective identity, first there is the question of its origin, whether its emergence is the direct expression of essential or structural traits shared by the participants, or an intersubjective construction that may or may not be related to these traits.

Second, there has been discussions concerning whether collective identity should be considered as a singular or as a plural entity. For strong proponents of primordialist accounts and structural perspectives of collective identity, collective identity will always be homogeneous as it is directly linked with the common traits of individuals. In the school of social constructivism, opinions differ. Some authors have found that at the level of movements (when considered as the addition of social movement organisations sharing the same theme like environmentalism and feminism), talking about a homogeneous collective identity does not make sense, whereas others found

that some common grounds show its presence. Different collective identities and different types of relationship between these collective identities have been found at different levels of a social movement, between individuals, sub-groups, social movement organisations, and larger movements encompassing them. Levels of unity and plurality seem to be different from one case to the other.

Third, there is a debate whether identities are fixed in time or change in time. Essentialists tend to think that collective identities are rather stable in that they are themselves attached to fixed primordial or structural roots. Social constructivists, on the other hand, see them as evolving.

Concerning collective identity and social movements on the internet, three debates as well can be identified. First, the possibility of collective identity in internet communities has early on been denied on the ground that real sense of community needs face-to-face interactions. This view, however, lost adherents because of empirical results that showed the contrary. By contrast, the existence of social movements relying exclusively on digital platforms of communication, such as Anonymous, is still denied. The same explanation is often given: face-to-face interaction and ‘real world’ actions are needed for a social movement to develop. Finally, the existence of collective identity in social movements that mainly use the internet is a contrasting debate. While collective identity had come to be considered as essential for a social movement, some authors, including McDonald (2015) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012), consider that new cultural characteristics in internet communities as well as new possibilities of organising collective action make, in some cases, collective identity redundant. Others, such as Milan (2015), consider that collective identity is as needed as it was before and that the internet is a medium that enhances the possibility to develop collective identity.

## 4. Aims and research question

The origin of the present work lies in the consideration that the strong heterogeneity of actions performed by Anonymous is singular (i.e. remarkable), and that as such it needs to be explained. As described in chapter two, the activist actions of Anonymous cover a large spectrum of issues: freedom of speech, freedom of information, human rights, democracy, personal abuse, child pornography, green rights, homelessness, drug legalisation, economic redistribution, counter-terrorism, and so on. Compared with other social movement organisations (SMOs), this heterogeneity is unusual in that SMOs are usually created around a specific theme that concerns a circumscribed field of the social system.

Concluding singularity from comparison with SMOs might be misleading, however. What we see of Anonymous, at first, is a series of collective actions that are reclaimed as Anonymous deeds from public statements. It does not imply that Anonymous is an organisation, if an organisation is described as a social network containing interactional features that permit coordinated actions. Anonymous might be similar to other activist logic that also share a heterogeneity of goals.

Most commentators see Anonymous as a social network of autonomous groups and campaigns that are often ephemeral and changing. One social movement entity which appear to have a similar shape is the global justice movement (GJM) that appeared in the 1990s (Della Porta 2007). It is a loose social network linking a multiplicity of social movement organisations and groups, which, taken together, offer a broad range of goals, most notably economic and social equality, environmentalism, and feminism. The GJM is a diverse social change movement and hence can readily be compared with the diversity of Anonymous

Anonymous still retains its singularity over the GJM as both assume different logics of action. First, the SMOs that compose the GJM do take care to distinguish themselves from one another by adopting different names and goals. Second, the main logic of interaction and coordination between these organisations is the temporary gathering: SMOs regularly meet in the same place either to sustain one another by brainstorming and exchanging resources (e.g., during World Social Forums) or they meet to perform massive protests together (mainly during international governmental meetings such as those of the G8, World Trade Organisation, or International Monetary

Fund). The logic of the GJM can be called ‘centripetal’: distinctly identifiable and diverse organisations that become a collective expression through central gatherings. By comparison, the logic of Anonymous is ‘centrifugal’: the existence of groups and individuals presenting themselves as one entity with indistinguishable parts and that take part in very diverse actions synchronically. This centrifugality is a singular logic that needs to be explained, which is the primary aim of this dissertation.

I explain in more detail in section 5.1 why I selected collective identity as an explanans for Anonymous’ centrifugality. The basic principle is that the use of the common name ‘Anonymous’ and other recognisable symbols, in order to sign diverse collective actions, expresses meanings attached to the performance of these actions. These meanings constitute the collective identity of Anonymous. Taking a collective identity approach has a further advantage of being the object of a lively debate concerning its existence in social movements that centre its internal communication on electronic platforms. This debate has been developed in section 3.2.2. Adding data to the debate can be a valuable contribution to the understanding of the role of collective identity in digitally enabled social movements, which is the second aim of the present work.

To make sense of the centrifugal logic of Anonymous with collective identity was at first merely a hypothesis, where the initial research question was, “Is there a collective identity of Anonymous, and if there is, what is it?” I would not have retained this research question if the answer to the first part had been negative because this would have meant that it contained little explanatory power to fulfil the aim of this work. Therefore, it was necessary to wait until sufficient indications were present showing that a form of collective identity was indeed present to stabilise the research question. Once this was attained, the research question was simplified: ‘What is the collective identity of Anonymous?’ As noted in section 3.1.4, there are no precise categories of collective identity to choose from, but there are some points of contention between different views. These points of contentions will be addressed as sub-questions: what is the origin of the collective identity of Anonymous? Is it homogeneous or plural? Is it stable or dynamic?

The next chapter presents the analytical model that has been constructed through a grounded theory approach. It already answered some of the secondary research questions fortuitously inasmuch as it reflects the empirical data of the study.

## 5. Analytical model

In this chapter I first explain how I constructed my model from a grounded theory approach. My model is based on Melucci (1989, 34) model to which I have given some additions. I describe his model, its limitations and its need for development, and then the concepts that I have added to construct a new model.

### 5.1. A grounded approach

This work adopts a grounded theory approach to explore the collective identity of Anonymous. Grounded theory (Glaser 1968, 1978, Strauss 1987) is an inductive logic in the social sciences in which theory is constructed from observation, or more precisely, where a process of recursion happens between data collection, construction of the theory through the analysis of the data, collection of new data best fitted for the theory constructed, refinement of the theory through the analysis of these new data, and so on until theoretical saturation (i.e. when additional data do not modify the theoretical construct anymore). While the methodology attached to the grounded theory logic in the next chapter is described, this section presents the steps of the recursion that have shaped the construction of the present model.

My research began with a preliminary research question: How do we explain the centrifugal logic of Anonymous? From there, the literature on social movement was reviewed to see which theoretical school could be most helpful. The aim at first was not necessarily to construct a theory from the ground up, but to select an already existing one if it was fit. Each school of thought on social movements described in section 3.1.2 looks at social movements from a particular point of view. In this sense, none are better or worse than the others, and choosing a useful one to apply must be related to the question one seeks to answer. The empirical feasibility of the application of the theory must also be considered. Thus, collecting preliminary data was done in parallel with the literature review.

The collection of preliminary data permitted me to eliminate some potential theories. To explain the centrifugal behaviour of Anonymous, social psychology can be a helpful and legitimate approach, particularly with the study of individual and shared grievances. But asking personal questions

would have posed security risks because it could reveal the identity of some respondents (some individuals took part in illegal actions). Structural models were inappropriate with respect to Anonymous: the collective seldom lobbies or negotiates with the state, which is the main topic of political process theory, and resource mobilisation theory implies the existence of a structured organisation to take care of resources, which does not exist in Anonymous. I began to focus on the social constructivist school. Framing theory has been a powerful tool to understand how social movements keep their structural integrity, motivate their members, and build bridges between different movements and collective actions. However, it implies for the most part the conscious and instrumental construction of discourse, mainly by ring leaders. I did not recognise this in Anonymous. However, a close notion in the literature, that of collective identity, has been used to research the same phenomenon, through the construction of shared meanings, which, in some instances, was done by all members in a flat organisation without formal bureaucratic influence or instrumental aims. It fitted well with the functioning of Anonymous. Also, by focusing on the literature on collective identity in social movements, I saw that there was a noteworthy debate concerning whether collective identity was present in social movements that were centred on the use of electronic platforms of communications: participating in this debate could add another aim to this research.

Having selected a broad path, I continued my data gathering to confirm the hypothesis that there were signs in Anonymous of the existence of a collective identity as it is broadly understood in the literature, with success. My research question became: 'What is the collective identity of Anonymous?' There was a multiplicity of models of collective identity. To determine which one could have the best explanatory power, I returned to the data gathering process. The popular model of Taylor and Whittier (1992) did not fit Anonymous in that it was developed for another type of social movement, as explained on page 54. Another popular model, that of Melucci, had been constructed from the observation of movements that had the same characteristics as that of Anonymous (for instance, the presence of a large pervasive network and the mechanisms of emergence of activist action). Returning to the data gathering process, I saw that Melucci's model was indeed a good model to apply. However, some of the data did not fit his model, which meant that I had to modify the original model to fit the new data. Fortunately, these data were also compatible with Melucci's general logic, so what was needed was to employ new concepts to his model to create an extended model. This form of model building gave fruitful results as I will show in my analysis.

## 5.2. The collective identity model of Alberto Melucci

From my own observation, Alberto Melucci is by far the most cited author in regards to defining collective identity in social movements. Paradoxically, the model he and his students used has seldom been reapplied, and never fully. Mueller (1994) tested part of the Meluccian model on the origins of the women's liberation movement with success. Ergas (2010) used Melucci's framework to describe an American urban ecovillage and Lee (2011) used it to study the US deaf rights movement. The Ergas and Lee studies are partial applications in the sense that the researchers used only selected concepts of the model.

### 5.2.1. General logic

Melucci developed a model of collective identity based on social constructivism and systems theory, and in which he offered a synthesis of the subjective, objective, and intersubjective perspectives discussed earlier in this dissertation. The intersubjective perspective is present with a strong focus on the interactional process of the collective construction of meanings. The subjective focus is expressed by the statement that collective identity is composed of the individuals' conceptions of what the movement is as well as their emotional investment towards it. The objective focus is conveyed through the idea that these conceptions should be studied as single entities. In the next paragraph, Melucci is placed within the debates on collective identity that were presented earlier in this work. He considers that the origin of collective identity comes from intersubjective construction, that it can be subjected to changes, and that it is both singular and plural in the manner that it is a system consisting of different components that relate to one another. Finally, collective identity is essential for social movements: an activist action can only appear when a collective identity configuration is set.

The point of departure for Melucci is his critique of the widespread conception that a social movement is an 'obvious' object whose existence and unity is a given because it is the result of structural causes (Melucci 1996, 69). This thought leads to an essentialist view of its collective identity, where it is the direct expression of the primordial or structural shared background of the members. Melucci reasons that a social movement should not be considered as a given, but as a result of the collective construction of a unity. Structural forces do not naturally give birth to social movements, nor are they sufficient for their emergence. Rather, they are the result of hard work from agential participants to create a cohesion that is not initially evident.

As such, collective identity is not an essentialist given but an object and a process that contributes to the construction of a social movement, and that does not necessarily contain just the shared structural or primordial traits of

its participants as some interpretations suggest. From collective identity construction processes, new definitions of the social movement can emerge. Collective identity, formed by a constant process of interactions, implies the process is not fixed but subjected to multiple changes. Melucci also takes a 'dynamic stability' view on collective identity: its content can appear stable but this stability is the result of a constant interactive reinforcement of its equilibrium.

Indeed, the most notable distinction of Melucci's model from others is his conception of collective identity as a system: collective identity is made of different components, of several definitions concerning what the social movement is for its members. These definitions are interrelated and sometimes in contradiction with one another. These contradictions need to be handled by the participants so that collective action can exist: different opinions need to be negotiated so that everyone agrees to participate in collective actions. The collective identity of a social movement is therefore a single entity that exists through the management of diverse and sometimes contradictory components. Collective identity is therefore both a content (the collective identity definitions and their relationships) and a process (with their intersubjective construction and the management of their contradictions).

Collective mobilizations can occur and can even continue because the actor has succeeded in realizing, and in the course of the action continues to realize, a certain integration between those contrasting [definitions]. This "social construction" of the "collective" through negotiation and renegotiation is continually at work when a form of collective action occurs. A failure or a break in this constructive process makes the action impossible. (Melucci 1996, 40)

To operate his model, Melucci divides collective identity into three analytical components that are empirically interrelated. The first component is the social network that sustains and composes the interactions of the collective identity process. The second component is the emotions invested by the activists to other participants, "which enable[s] individuals to recognize themselves in each other" (Melucci 1989, 34). Such emotional investment is what makes the difference between aggregated actions and collective actions with a sense of solidarity. The third component of collective identity is the set of shared "cognitive definitions" (Melucci 1996, 70) that are the internalised ideas concerning what the movement is according to its participants. In the next sections, the concepts of social network and of collective identity cognitive definitions (CICDs) are elaborated.

### 5.2.2. The submerged network

Melucci's description of the submerged network is similar to the structure of Anonymous. What Melucci calls submerged network is a social network



larger than the interactions concerned with activist actions. It is a social network that often belongs to a subculture or a counterculture (see definition p. 79) and that is pervasive to the everyday life activities of the participants. The social network of a social movement (i.e. the interactions between members that concern activist actions) should be understood as the activation of a specific network configuration within the submerged network. Collective identity is constructed within this submerged network.

Melucci constructed his model from the observation of activist groups (a youth centre, a feminist group, and an environmentalist group) in Milano during the 1980s (Melucci 1989, ch. 3). these three groups emerged from the submerged networks they belonged to. Ephemeral collective actions emerged from fragmented, overlapping groups such as those mentioned above that were embedded in this submerged network. The network is qualified as 'submerged' because the process of formation of groups, collective actions, and collective identity it hosts is invisible to the eye of the public and to the researcher who is accustomed to observe it in semi-formal contexts (such as assembly meetings). In Melucci's cases, processes of formation of collective actions are immersed in the everyday social life in such diverse areas of socialisation as homes, cafés, parties, and any other places of socialisation. The submerged network may be indistinct and difficult to define because individuals belong to different social circles or subcultural groups and often are in a state of transitory, temporary, and limited activist involvement. Activist groups in themselves mobilise only periodically in response to specific issues, and some mobilisations dissolve for diverse reasons while others emerge. The submerged network functions as a system of exchanges in which individuals circulate from one affinity group to another and from one mobilisation to another, and where information circulates as well, especially CICDs. Submerged networks are laboratories for the "experimentation and practice of new cultural models, forms of relationships and alternative perceptions and meanings of the world" (Melucci 1989, 60). The same characteristics can be found in the submerged network of Anonymous.

There is an empirical distinction between the submerged network, which is long-lasting, a plurality of fleeting groups and subcultures, a social network anchored in everyday life on the one hand, and the unstable unity of activist groups that emerge to carry out collective actions, on the other. They are unstable because they always have to actively enable solidarity between participants, to make participants agree to participate in collective action that have specific characteristics. Therefore, the production of a collective identity, that is of an agreement on the specifics of collective action, is needed to enable collective action. Actors interact with one another, mainly discursively, to create common collective identity definitions. Each actor may have her own ideas on what the movement is, and the process of collective identity formation aims at harmonising these ideas through mutual influence and to negotiate the possibility of action when identity definitions between different

persons are not harmonised and are contradictory. Recognising these interactive processes is part of the current analysis.

### 5.2.3. Collective identity cognitive definitions

For Melucci, the content of the collective identity of a social movement (i.e. the shared definitions) refers to the characteristics of its activist actions. Collective identity consists for Melucci in a system of actions or “action system” (Melucci 1996, 67), which contains the CICDs as well as their relations with one another.

What does Melucci mean by “cognitive definitions” (Melucci 1996, 70)? He never actually elaborates on the concept, but we can surmise that he borrows it from the social psychology of culture. In this field, cognitive definitions refer to the ideas persons have, their “mental representations”, “mental structures”, “ideas”, or “units of cultural analysis” (DiMaggio 1997). They can be a large range of shared meanings such as “values, norm, attitudes, beliefs, and ideological orientations” (Johnston 2009, 21). The concept has been developed in reaction to a unitarian view of culture as a “seamless web” (DiMaggio 1997, 264), indivisible and homogeneous across groups and individuals of the same culture. The concept of cognitive definition attempts to differentiate between different units of meaning in a culture, which could explain why culture is sometimes fragmented across groups and inconsistent in its manifestations (DiMaggio 1997, 264). By embedding these units into the mind of each individual, it could also explain how individuals sometimes deviate from one particular cultural behavioural requirement while maintaining all others (ibid.). Finally, and this is particularly visible in Melucci, using a concept of culture as consisting of several singular components enables us to see that culture is not a steady state entity, but a field where different meanings constantly interact in different positions of cooperation, competition, or antagonism.

What are the cognitive definitions of Melucci’s action system? As noted earlier, they concern the characteristics of the activist actions taken by the social movement. These are 1) the goals of the movement (closing a nuclear facility, fostering public acceptance of a minority, collectivisation of the means of production, etc.), 2) the means used (demonstration, direct action, propaganda, etc.), and 3) the relationships with its environment (how the movement relates to the media, the state, allies, etc.). Ideas that emerge from different individuals can be both interrelated and contradictory, which can create tensions between participants over the form of collective action to be taken. Collective action is enabled when the collective actor succeeds in stabilising these tensions through interactive negotiations between participants. Equilibrium and stability are always re-established through the collective identity construction processes that respond to changes and shifts in events internal and external to the movement. Melucci talks of a “multipolar

action system” (Melucci 1996, 40) when goals, means, and environment categories are all containing two polar opposites, i.e. contradicting CICDs.

Let us take the example of one case study of an Italian leftist youth centre situated in Milan in the 1980s (Melucci, 1989, 68ff.). Concerning the goal component of the action system, the movement was torn between the old and new left, i.e. the goal of class struggle and revolutionary social change on the one hand, versus the expression of alternative lifestyles, on the other. Concerning the means of bringing about change, there was a tension between reformism and dialogue with society versus antagonism and direct confrontation. In its relationship with the environment, a tension existed between introversion and extroversion, focusing on strengthening the affective bonds within the group versus underlining external resources and actions towards the wider society. The action system thus comprised the goals of the old left/new left, the aims reformism/antagonism, the environment introversion/extroversion, and their relationships. In this case, the tensions were not handled well because compromise could not be achieved and spaces for the expression of each CICD could not be created, leaving the movement in a state of paralysis and activist action impossible to carry out.

Tensions within the action system are dealt with within the network of relationships between the actors of the movement. This network, which is a certain configuration of the submerged network, includes “forms of organizations and models of leadership, communicative channels, and technologies of communication” (Melucci 1995, 45). The forms of this network contribute to the manner in which tensions are, or are not, stabilised. This network can create more formal and stable organisations that can influence how tensions are acted upon. Centralised, the organisation might attempt to crystallise the situation by imposing a dominant collective identity to prevent de-segregation, but at the risk of personal demotivation. Decentralised, it might try to handle the tensions by giving the contradictory CICDs different ‘spaces’ of action, which may prevent a sudden inward collapse. However, decentralisation can also foster the dissolution of the movement. Tensions between CICDs, however, are not just a risk for a social movement, but can also strengthen the definitions through a logic of competition, where definitions are reaffirmed either discursively or through their application by the participants who champion them: the management of tensions is also a performance of CICDs.

### 5.3. An extended model of Melucci’s collective identity.

#### 5.3.1. Limitations of Melucci’s model

In the beginning of the presentation of Melucci’s model, I mentioned that it was very often cited but seldom applied. This situation might have come

about because Melucci offered an inspiring base to study collective identity, with many authors adopting the notions of submerged network, intersubjective construction of shared meanings, plurality of collective identity definitions, potential contradictions, etc. However, the model Melucci created has some limitations for the study of social movements that might have restrained its full application by other scholars. These limitations are related to the fact that collective identity definitions only concern the movement's goals, the means, and the relationships with the environment. A large number of works have found other types of collective identity definition of social movements, such as those related to their organisation or to moral values (Flesher Fominaya 2010b).

Why doesn't Melucci include these CICDs? The reason is that he has a different point of view on social movements than most other scholars who study collective identity. While most authors usually take the social movement organisation (SMO) as the object of study (more or less centralised and identifiable), and all of what it does, Melucci focuses on actions, and more precisely, on activist collective actions. He does not focus on other types of collective action that many SMOs participate in, such as lobbying, charity, or a countercultural way of life as we have seen in section 3.1.1. This was a conscious choice as Melucci considered that the study of SMOs as reified entities had lost its explanatory power and that studying the characteristics of activist actions in themselves could be more promising (Melucci 1989, ch. 1). On this point, I would criticise Melucci on the fact that it seems that for him, to understand how activist actions are enabled it is sufficient to understand their action system. I would suggest otherwise, in the sense that other collective identity definitions, for instance those pertaining to organisation, can have a role in it. They should be researched and analysed.

More importantly, I think that, concerning the present work, the study of a movement as a whole is still relevant, especially because I do not consider Anonymous as only a purveyor of activist actions, but as all that it can be to explain its centrifugal nature.

Although Melucci's project and mine are different, the basic principles of Melucci's model are well suited for my analysis. Anonymous is embedded in a submerged network from which more or less ephemeral groups and collective actions emerge. The construction of collective identity definitions that can be extraneous to the action system centres on the same type of logic. Eventually, the extension and application of Melucci's model to Anonymous are done by exposing the model to other collective identity definitions that have been expressed by the participants while retaining all other characteristics of Melucci's model.

### 5.3.2. The extended model

I define collective identity as the qualities of the abstract notion of a collective by the individuals who consider themselves to be a part of it. These qualities can be the shared characteristics of the individuals that the movement gather, or they can be the emergent properties of the movement.

Collective identity components additional to those that, for Melucci, are directly related to activist actions (goals, means, environment) have been identified inductively during the present ethnographic process. There are four components: countercultural characteristics, organisational and decisional matters, anonymity and its attached ethics, and universality. These components depart to some extent from Melucci's systemic view: contradictions concern less the relations between the components than between the components and the reality of practices. Tensions between collective identity definitions and practices often result in attempts to reinforce the former through certain behaviour and discursive actions.

Added to Melucci's model is another type of emotion. Melucci describes the emotional investments of participants towards one another that serve to create empathy and a sense of solidarity. A direct emotional link can also be found between the participant and the whole of the community. Emotions can also be CICDs in the sense that they can be goals in themselves. Below, some introductory definitions are given of these four CICDs, as well as precisions on those concerning the action system present in Anonymous. First I give a description of Anonymous' submerged network.

#### **The submerged network of Anonymous**

Anonymous resembles Melucci's case studies in its structure: collective actions emerge from the configuration and activation of a specific network of individuals, of platforms and resources that are all embedded into a larger network pervasive to everyday life. Anonymous has developed a large submerged network in which individuals and ideas circulate, upholding the emergence of collective actions and collective identity. With the growing popularity of 4chan, an ecology of electronic platforms of communication developed around it, with an accelerated pace after its activist turn, such as other image boards, forums, IRC servers, wikis. To draw a cartography of this network is difficult because platforms are numerous, many are hidden, some are temporary, and some are ambiguously attached to the Anonymous counterculture. Still, some central hubs are easy to spot. The centre of non-activist Anonymous is still 4chan. Other image boards exist and some (e.g., '7chan', '8chan', '420chan' and '711chan') have gained popularity after the choice of 4chan founder to censor some contents in August 2006, such as paedopornographic and underage content and the planning of raids.

Another important platform is the wiki 'Encyclopaedia Dramatica', created in December 2004, which is a repository of the Anonymous culture. It has

been described as “Wikipedia's evil twin. It's a site where almost every article is biased, offensive, unsourced, and without the faintest trace of political correctness” (Paget 2010). IRC servers were also created to manage collective pranks. Platforms continued to diversify following the activist turn of Anonymous: important ones are the forum ‘WhyWeProtest’ (replacing ‘enturbulation’ in 2008) and the IRC server ‘AnonNet’. Both of these servers hosted Chanology operations; the IRC ‘AnonOps’ hosts Ubiquitous Anonymous. To this has to be added several other IRC servers of smaller size and of less stable existence, a handful of news aggregators and discussion websites, a consequent network of Twitter accounts with a dozen popular accounts, presence in popular and less popular social networks (e.g., Facebook and Reddit), video chat networks, offline local chapters (Appendix 7 shows a network map that humorously describes the relationships of the participants in different American chapters during Project Chanology), web radios (e.g., ‘Radio AnonOps’ and ‘AnonUK radio’), forums, chats and websites residing in the ‘darknet’, constituted of different protocols such as TOR and i2p, that are encrypted and offer more privacy, and a web store selling Anonymous-themed merchandise (t-shirts, masks...), which profits are managed by an organisation supporting arrested and imprisoned Anons.

The density of the submerged network can be assessed. Density describes how well the nodes are connected to one another (calculated by the proportion of direct ties relative to the total number possible), which can tell us how fast individuals and information can circulate from one point of the network to another. Two scales have to be taken into account: the morphology of the network within one internet platform and the morphology of the network encompassing all platforms. The possibility of individual and information transfers and their velocity is not necessarily high: Anonymous forums or IRC servers are home for many and seemingly unrelated operations that could well be compartmented, i.e. participants to different operations might not communicate with one another. However, this does not appear to be the case in Anonymous IRC servers. To assess it, a network analysis was performed on one of the most popular. IRC is suited to analysis because data on the location of users in the different channels (that are often assigned to one operation) are public. I have decided not to publish this analysis because of the uneasiness that part of the community expressed towards its content. They feared it could be “food for feds” (Anon7), data used by law enforcement to help disrupt the community. This is why I do not include this method in the methodology and methods chapter. The main results can still be summoned without harm; it shows that the clustering coefficient is close to zero, which means that channels/operations have many users in common. The average path length, i.e. the average distance between all pairs of nodes, is small (slightly below three): on average, one person is

connected to another person through two others persons in the social network, which allows information to be spread quickly.

When it comes to the submerged network as a whole, it is difficult to assess how well linked the different platforms are (i.e. how many agents use several platforms) because personal identification is often not possible. This is because users often do not use the same handle between platforms, if they use one at all. Some platforms have minimal interactions owing to a schismatic history (e.g., between Chanologists and Ubiquitous), so that both factions often decide to create their own parallel operations for the same topic. All bridges are not severed, however, as some people among the two factions have kept emotional ties with one another and a few inhabit the platforms of both camps. More impacting, Anons usually inform themselves regularly on the comings and goings of others in the different platforms of the submerged network. News aggregators, notably Twitter, allow for a relatively panoramic view on all public operations signed Anonymous at one point in time. Information travels fast and it is a situation that favours collective identity construction processes. Finally, an important feature of the submerged network, which impacts deeply on the collective identity construction process, is the easiness to create ad hoc platforms of communication. New threads can be created within forums, new channels can be summoned in IRC servers, and new IRC servers and new forums can be created with few resources.

### **Countercultural characteristics**

Some countercultural characteristics of Anonymous are collective identity components. Culture is an intuitively apparent concept as well as a broad and imprecise term (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 3). Jasper (2010) sees culture as “shared mental worlds and their perceived embodiment”. Williams (2013) defines culture as “includ[ing] sets of symbols such as language, intangible, abstract ‘mental products’ such as ideas, beliefs, values, and identity, and the meanings given to material objects such as clothing, decorations, art objects, buildings, and the like”. Counterculture has been defined as a “social subgroup possessing distinctive norms and values in opposition to the widely accepted beliefs and practices of the dominant culture” (Haenfler 2013, 1). Counterculture is marked by the practice of deviance, which is a type of collective action in the typology of Melucci, and one that is expressed in Anonymous. Two types of deviance, offense and parrhesia, are part of Anonymous’ collective identity.

### **Multipolar action system**

The concept of multipolar action system has been defined earlier. There is one multipolar action system pervasive to all Anonymous collective actions. What is singular with Anonymous is that both poles of the system have been

personified into two archetypal figures representing Anonymous that I call the 'trickster' and the 'hero'.

### **Organisation and decision-making process**

Anonymous participants often define the movement by its forms of organisation and decision-making processes. This is often the case for movements that, like Anonymous, aim for horizontal organisation and participatory democracy (see Taylor and Whittier (1999) for feminist movements and Flesher Fominaya (2010b) for the global justice movement). Horizontal organisation refers to the lack of a chain of command regarding action-taking. This is the reason for the lack of hierarchy and specialisation, i.e. the lack of stable and formal nomination of individuals to specific works. Participatory democracy refers to those cases where decision-making is not centralised. This kind of democracy implies that no specific group within the movement has decisional power, which is in contrast to representative democracy. Participatory democracy, a consensus-oriented democracy, usually tries to include all concerned parties into the decision-making process: participants should engage in rational argumentation and mutual deliberation so that most agents agree with the final decision.

### **Anonymity**

Wallace (1999, 23) defines anonymity as the noncoordinability of traits. "Anonymity is a kind of relation between an anonymous person and others, where the former is known only through a trait or traits which are not coordinatable with other traits such as to enable identification of the person as a whole". An anonymous person is therefore not someone whom no one knows about; rather, an anonymous person is someone who is known for something but whose whole identity remains impenetrable. An anonymous author, for instance, is known as being the writer of a book, but his contact details are unavailable. The different uses of anonymity are defined in greater detail in the analytical chapter, where they are linked to Anonymous' practices.

On electronic platforms of communication, anonymity must be differentiated from pseudonymity: anonymity is the situation where the author of a message cannot be recognised or linked with other messages, and pseudonymity is the situation where the user can be recognised from one message to the next through a stable pseudonym.

### **Universality**

It is often asserted that Anonymous is an 'idea' that can potentially be used by anyone. To designate this 'idea', the concept of 'sign' is sometimes used in this work. Crudely put, a sign is a semiotic concept proposed by Saussure (1916) that posits the existence of a cognitive unit composed of a signified



(an idea, such as a cognitive idea of a shoe) and a signifier (its represented form, such as the written or articulated word ‘shoe’). The signifiers of Anonymous are its own name and the graphic symbols it has chosen to represent itself with, the most well known being the Guy Fawkes mask from the movie ‘V for Vendetta’. For a participant of Anonymous, the signified aspect of Anonymous is the definition she makes herself of it. Because Anonymous is often considered an idea to be used, and to underline this point, individuals who participate in Anonymous actions will sometimes be referred to as ‘Anonymous users’.

## 5.4. Conclusion

The present work uses a grounded approach to construct its theoretical model. The first observations and the review of the literature led me to choose a social constructivist model, the collective identity model of Melucci (1995). Melucci points out that the existence of a social movement should not be taken from granted and does not naturally comes out of a group’s position in the social system, but is the product of a collective work that he call collective identity construction process. Collective identity can be divided in three analytical components: a network of interactions between participants, emotional investments between participants, and collective identity cognitive definitions, which are the definitions of the movement that participants share. The model of Melucci is particularly suited to Anonymous because its social network model fits the social network of Anonymous. But Melucci only consider the CICDs that are related to the characteristics of the collective action, that are the goal of the action, the means of the action, and its relationship to the environment. Anonymous is not simply a purveyor of activist actions, but also of other types of action, and has such other CICDs the participants hold have to be considered. The present research identifies five sets of CICDs that are the counterculture of Anonymous, its action system, its organisation, the practice of anonymity and attached ethics of self-effacement, and the concept of universality.

## 6. Methodology and methods

*But how do you want to study something that doesn't exist?*

*Anon22*

This sections starts by explaining the methodology of this work, namely the use of grounded theory and ethnography. Then the four methods used in this work are described: participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and respondent feedback. In the third section, my experience in the field is described. The fourth section deals with ethical concerns and security, and finally the fifth section concerns the questions of representativeness and generalisability.

### 6.1. Methodology

#### 6.1.1. A grounded approach (continued)

As developed earlier, the methodological logic of this work is inspired from grounded theory, an inductive method where theory is constructed from data. More exactly, it is a dialectical process where analytical models are constructed through the selection and analysis of data, a selection and analysis that become themselves more directed, focused and thorough by using the model under construction. My methodology is not a 'true' or 'full' grounded theory approach as Glaser (1998) would understand it, because I didn't construct my model from scratch but rather selected an already-existing one early in the inductive process. Afterwards however, grounded theory continued to play an important role since I used the method to extend Melucci's model.

As a method, grounded theory knows three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding refers to the construction of conceptual categories from the data gathered, in order to 'open up' theoretical possibilities. Pieces of data, or 'indicators' are selected, and through their examination and the comparison of their similarities and difference, abstract concepts are constructed (Punch 1998, 212). At the stage of open coding, codes are provisional, it is not known if they will be useful for further analysis: its function is to expose theoretical possibilities in the data. When I began open coding I knew early on that I was looking for collective identity cognitive

definitions (CICDs). The open coding was therefore not ‘pure’ since I was partly using an *a priori* scheme. Open coding was used to verify the presence of the CICDs foreseen by Melucci (those contained in the action system) and to see if other CICDs were present. I began to identify all themes that were potential CICDs from the data I was gathering. For instance, interview excerpts such as ‘anonymous is decentralized—and therefore disorganized—it operates by network—irc network’ (Anon8) was an indicator for the construction for an ‘organisation’ category; quotes from a forum saying ‘Anonymous protects nature’ created an ‘environment’ category, and some discussions on the IRC channel created a ‘criticism of someone’s practice’ category. I used the cloud service ‘Dedoose’ to code my data, which offers practical options for search and retrieval of excerpts.

Open coding is not the endless generation of concepts. To avoid to end up with too many codes, Glaser advises a ‘dip and skip’ method, which implies to intensively code some parts (dip), while at the same time skipping through the overall data to look for the most sensitive conceptual patterns. This is how I began to select the collective identity definitions presented in this work, taking the candidates that had the most indicators and that seemed to be cared the most by respondents.

Axial coding is the process of interconnecting the categories constructed during open coding to create a set of logical relations. These relations can be, for instance, causes and consequences, stimulus-responses associations, seeing things as parts or stages of a process, etc. In my case, most conceptual associations were already in place with Melucci’s model: for instance the principle of the construction of CICDs through agent interaction, potential tensions between CICDs, and the emergence of collective actions through a specific network configuration of the submerged network. Axial coding was used to confirm these phenomena. New relationships were also found, for instance the tensions between CICDs and actual practices.

Finally, selective coding is the selection of a few categories and relations created from open and axial coding to generate a theory or model. Selective coding is the definitive selection of categories and practically ends the process of open coding. In my case selective coding consisted in selecting the five sets of CICDs that are analysed in this work. They are the ones that are shared the most and that are considered as most important for the respondents. Other categories and relations selected were the expressions of CICDs during collective action and the diverse relationships of complementarity and contradictions between them. From this selection I constructed the extended model of collective identity of Melucci presented in the last chapter. The result of my study, finally, produces new concepts, such as modularity and connective action, which I present in the general conclusion. The next sections presents how the data have been collected.

### 6.1.2. Choosing ethnography

To apply the theoretical model described in the previous section is to look for different elements: opinions and thoughts that form collective identity cognitive definitions (the subjective side of collective identity), cultural artefacts such as video, images or pamphlets reflecting cognitive definitions (the objective side of collective identity), and the network of interactions in which cognitive definitions can be expressed, exchanged, and negotiated (the intersubjective side). Melucci (1995, 55ff.) left a concise methodology for those who want to follow his model. The researcher approaches the activist group and proposes a contractual relationship, where the group agrees to welcome him and to give him information, and the researcher agrees to offer feedback on the possible problem the movement has with its structural integrity, as well as to offer thoughts for self-reflexivity. The researcher should focus on interactions between agents related to the collective identity construction process. To that effect, the central method of the research is the group interview because it triggers a process of self-reflexivity and permits the witnessing of the dynamics of identity construction.

I do not follow this method. When I entered the field, I was not bold enough to ask for a contract and present myself as a researcher that could help Anons to maintain a healthy organisation and to understand themselves a little more. I would probably have been received as food for laugh. Also, I did not conduct, at least formally, group discussions. With a population of individuals living in different time zones, many not following 9-to-5 job hours and who are often occupied with other things than following IRC conversations, group interviews were difficult to implement. However, informal group discussions were performed when several persons of interest happened to be available at the same time.

Instead, a triangulation of ethnographical methods was used to grasp the subjective, objective, and intersubjective components of collective identity. Ethnography is suited to the present research for two reasons. First, most of the present research concerns ideas, emotions, and interactions that have yet to be defined, so that a qualitative method, which has as goal the understanding of the nature of social phenomena (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 2), is particularly useful. A quantitative approach could have been applied to increase precision by quantifying the different units that have been found (frequency of cognitive definitions within the population, of themes within a forum, etc.). However, because of scarcity of time, technical limitations, and the possible reluctance of the population, a quantitative approach was not feasible. However, it could be part of subsequent research as I develop in the general conclusion.

Second, my project is characterised by the fact that I had no knowledge of what kind of cognitive definitions concerning collective identity I would be dealing with, and that the possibilities were vast: knowing from the state of

the art on collective identity in social movements, its components can be virtually any characteristics of a social movement. And to put Meluccian blinkers by looking only at the action system was to risk missing important pieces of information. Because of this uncertainty, what was needed was a method that could be panoptical, both in width—all phenomena of the field studied—and in depth, i.e. after having selected the proper characteristics, to be able to find a complete, detailed account of their forms, modalities and systemic relations.

Ethnography (compared with more sociological methods centred on interviews and questionnaires) can offer these two demanding needs because of two of its attributes: First, it is a set of methods, a toolkit that allows one to choose the most appropriate instruments for a given case. These methods can be combined to insure a larger grasp of the field so that we recognise all phenomena of interest to the research. Second, because it entails a personal immersion into the everyday life of the community (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 2), the approach permits a detailed comprehension. Developed in its modern form at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnography is centred on participant observation, the immersion and participation of the researcher into the everyday life of a community in order to get a holistic comprehension of it (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 2). Participant observation is the starting point of any ethnographic research, and its preliminary results will often be influential in the choice and design of other methods used. Other methods that can accompany participant observation are interviews, pure observation, discourse and literary analysis, semiotics, surveys, focus group, social network analysis, and so on. The use of different methods, which is called triangulation, is deployed for several reasons: it extends the scope of observation of the researcher because one method can reveal things that another method could not. It can also sharpen analytical capabilities by crosschecking the different ontological and epistemological postulates of each method. By corollary, triangulation tends to alleviate the epistemological bias and limitations of the latter (Miller and Fox 2004, 35-6). For instance, interviewing relies on the assumption that interviewees can give a relatively reliable description of reality. Direct observation tends to assume that events are strongly affected by the actions of the participants. Content analysis of political manifesto tend to assume that the person(s) who wrote them expressed not only their own belief but also that of a whole political movement (Berg and Lune 2012). The superposition of methods gives the student the opportunity to recognise these biases and to provide a more reliable account of reality.

The use of the ethnographic method in the use of digital media, since the 1990s, has been prolific. Coleman (2010), in her comprehensive review of the literature, classifies it between three broad and overlapping categories. The first concerns the “cultural politics of media” (ibid., 488), how identities (for instance gender, youth subcultures, diasporas, nations...) are handled and manipulated through electronic media. Nakamura (2008) looks at how

default avatars in graphic online worlds—white and masculine—“are intensified, modulated, reiterated, and challenged” by users online (34). Burrell and Anderson (2008) show how for many diasporic groups easy access to electronic means of communication has been central to develop and nurture interactions from family relations to political movements. Finally, ethnographers and nongovernmental organisations have helped indigenous population to construct electronic databases that includes a repository of norms and folklore (Srinivasan 2006). Coleman (2010, 488) calls the second category “prosaics of digital media”. This set concerns how digital media relate to already existing social practices. Finance for instance has been studied: Zaloom (2006) shows how trading firms created a dynamic of hyper-competitiveness between employees with the introduction of the personal computer. Other researchers show the role of the internet in informal economies, such as digital piracy (Larkin 2008, Philip 2005, Sundaram 2007); fan fiction (Jenkins 2006, Silvio 2007); “mail-order” brides (Constable 2003, Johnson 2007); and email scams and spam (Brunton 2009, Burrell 2008, 2011, Smith 2010). The third and last category explores “the vernacular culture of digital media” (Coleman 2010, 488), those phenomena that are dependants on electronic media and modes of communication for their existence. The present work can fit into this category. Coleman (2013b) for instance describes the ethics of the Debian OS community, and O’Neil (2009) explains the power structure of Wikipedia. Finally several studies have focused on digitally enabled social and political movements such as the technological activism of nongovernmental organisations (McInerney 2009), immigrant mobilisation (Costanza-Chock 2008) and political blogging in Iran (Doostdar 2004, Sreberny and Khiabany 2010).

The next section present the four methods used in this work: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and respondent feedback.

## 6.2. Methods

### 6.2.1. Participant observation

Participant observation took place on several IRC servers (chatrooms) that are part of the Anonymous submerged network. Participant observation helped me to gather data in three manners: first, to participate in Anonymous interactions and collective actions permitted me to get a holistic comprehension of the stakes at work in the daily life on Anonymous IRCs. Second, it permitted me to follow conversations that had to do with collective identity. Finally, it permitted me to meet my interviewees. Junker (1960, from Hammersley and Atkison 1983) describes several roles a researcher can take in fieldwork: from “complete observer” to “complete participant”.

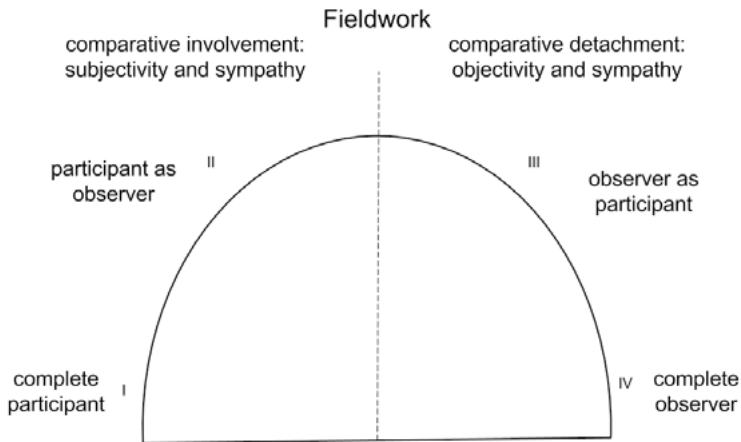


Figure 8. The different roles in fieldwork according to Junker.

To be a complete participant is not only about ‘passing’ as a member, but also about being or becoming a member. Here, the identity of the researcher as researcher is negated for complete impersonation and understanding of the field. This identity is sometimes concealed. On the other side of the spectrum, is the complete observers, who have no contact whatsoever with the object of their research, as they attempt to fulfil the positivist requirement of non-perturbation of the field. Both roles entail methodological shortcomings. The complete participant enjoys the possibility to “travel incognito, obtain inside knowledge, and avoid the trouble of access negotiation” (Junker 1960, 94). However, becoming the true member of a group entails that one has to comply with one specific social role, as well as its attached social expectations, which restrains the liberty of the researcher and capacity to gather a wide array of data. Also, complete participation allows researchers to discover cultural codes and what it feels like to be a part of the community. However, this role runs the risk of losing reflexivity towards their experience of the field. The role of complete observer enjoys the same advantage as its opposite when it comes to the avoidance of access negotiation: one does not have to disclose one’s identity as a researcher, and therefore avoid the resistance and biases it entails. But important processes of data gathering are lost: there is no opportunity for conducting interviews, and the impossibility to live direct experiences and emotional investment can lead to the misinterpretation of observed behaviour.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest choosing a position in between these two roles. Researchers should live a life as similar to that of the group members, but also retain marginality. “Going native” assumes the risk of abandoning the task of analysis for the joys of participation. They also risk “over-rapport”, which denotes the negative consequences of being too

close to a group: too strong friendships with participants can strip some researchers of their critical abilities. Getting attached to a clique can also impede relationships with other members of a group (Miller 1952, 98). Therefore, ethnographers must become a “marginal native” (Freilich 1970). They must be aware as much as possible of the lived experience the community while retaining some reflexivity and distance: “The ethnographer needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness; and, in overt participant observation, socially he or she will usually be poised between stranger and friend” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 89). This optimal situation is a fragile equilibrium between closeness and reflexivity. It is difficult to handle and often results in insecurity, stress, and frustration from the ethnographer (ibid.). This topic is discussed further in relation to ethics in section 6.4.

My position in the Junker diagram is “participant as observer”. It is hardly possible not to develop feelings, positive or negative, when immersing oneself in a group. The important thing to do is to realise that emotions *will* distort the students’ judgment and analysis. Thus, it becomes necessary to take a step back, to try to reflect on what the distortions are, and to rectify the research findings that have been contaminated by our emotionally filled subjectivities into something that we can think of as objectively closer to reality. During my immersion, I weaved strong emotional bonds with two particular groups of Anons that ‘adopted me’, that is they showed me around, vouched for me during interactions with other people and groups, and actively helped me to gather data. Another group I had been in contact with included some users that had been aggressive toward me, and I found myself writing texts that were openly judgmental, favouring one group at the expense of the other. I realised this, reflected on it, took a closer look at the topic, and re-wrote my text, hoping the revision would yield a less skewed vision of reality.

To conclude, the position of the ethnographer when performing participant observation can vary between complete participation and complete observation. Both have their downsides and the middle is usually considered an optimal position methodologically speaking. However, this ideal middle approach is at the cost of the emotional well-being of the researchers in that they need to retain the qualities of a marginal and the qualities of a native at the same time, which creates emotional strains. I describe my experience in the field in section 6.3.

## 6.2.2. Interviews

Interviews, compared with public discussions and analysis of archives, permit closer access to the collective identity definitions an individual holds. It allows for more intimate conversations, allows individuals to take their time and give thoughtful questions and answers, and it gives respondents the op-



portunity to say things they would not like to say publicly. I decided to conduct interviews on IRC rather than to use other media such as email or video-conference. First, because IRC was the preferred choice of most Anons, and it seemed reasonable to let the participants choose their most comfortable medium (Kazmer and Xie 2008, 273). Second, IRC is the ‘natural environment’ in which daily interactions happen. Performing interviews in natural environments permits “contextual naturalness”, in which “participants can use language the way they do in most of their everyday interactions” (Ibid. 259, referring to Shuy 2003, 541). Third, other possible choices had serious flaws: email conversations do not allow the dialogic and interactive traits of synchronous conversations, and video conference entails audio and video, which gives clues to the identity of the person and would therefore be a displeasing experience to many participants.

Online interviews differ from face-to-face interviews. One disadvantage of online interviews is the disappearance of physical cues. Body language, silences and laughs are unavailable for analysis. This drawback is somewhat compensated by the fact that internet messaging permits the display of a dense and sensitive spectrum of emotions through emoticons. Second, IRC interviews take much more time. In my experience as well as others (Markham 1998, 72), synchronous written conversations can take between 2-4-fold the time it would take compared with face-to-face interviews. But the relatively long time needed to perform an interview is largely offset by the lack of need for written transcription.

Another advantage of online interviewing is that there is no need to go to a physical place, which means that a potential respondent would be more willing to participate. Not that setting an interview time is always easier online (Markham 1998, 62). In my case, most of the time I was able to perform interviews in the week after my request; in a few cases interviews took several weeks to start. Another benefit concerns the quality of discussions. internet text-mediated interviews have been shown to be “better thought out, better organized, and richer than natural conversation” (Hiltz 1993, from Kazmer and Xie 2008, 269). Writing instead of talking gives the actors more time to speak one’s mind, with more clarity. For Shepherd (2003, 11), internet writing renders a liberated speech:

They feel a sense of control over their self-presentation, which is not available face-to-face or even over the phone. They are safe from the judgements that others make about bodily performance (tone of voice, eye contact, gestures) and about who they might be: what they look like, what they are wearing, their age and gender.

I performed interviews that had from the start an unstructured and a semi-structured part. The interview plan became progressively more semi-structured as it was constructed in parallel with the construction of my model, following the grounded theory process. At first, I asked questions related

to Melucci's model of collective identity: cognitive definitions concerning ends, means, and environment; their possible compatibilities and antagonisms; the shape of the submerged network, and emotional investment toward other participants. The rest of the interview was unstructured, the respondent and I discussing of the life in the Anonymous submerged network in general and about events linked to Anonymous. This unstructured part permitted me to identify new CICDs among other things which permitted me to construct my own model.

Once additional CICDs were identified, questions concerning them were added in the interview plan. The interview plan took a relatively stable and final shape around the fifteenth interview (available in Appendix 4). From then, the questions are arranged under these themes (the topic of emotions does not constitute a part in itself but is evoked regularly through the interview, following the different topics). Because discussions always take different paths, interviews hardly follow the interview plan. This means that my list of questions has rarely been processed from A to Z.

Each interview begins with the presentation of the consent form (available in Appendix 3). The respondents are asked if they have any questions regarding our discussion. Thereafter, the first batch of questions concerns the first contact with Anonymous. How did the respondents hear of the movement? Why did they decide to join? How was the initial contact (usually on IRC)? This series of questions serves as an icebreaker, helps the respondents to recall their first experiences and helps me understand barriers to entry and network mechanisms. The second batch of questions concerns the goals of the respondents and of the movement in general. I ask what are their interests in terms of activism, what should Anonymous focus on, if there were any tensions between different goals. The third batch concerns the means. What is the most effective technique? The least effective? Are some morally wrong or right? The fourth batch concerned Anonymous' relations to the outside world, states, press, citizens, and so on. What does Anonymous want to show to the public? To whom are its goals directed towards? What does the respondents think of the press when it talks of Anonymous? Are other organisations helping Anonymous? What's the biggest threat to Anon? The fifth batch concerns the organisation of Anonymous. It permits an understanding of the social network. Are the IRC servers important? How do people meet to perform an operation? How are communal decisions taken? Are tensions present? Do people take precedence over others in the decision-making process? Is there any conflict that concerns the type of organisation? The sixth batch is also related to the organisation and focuses on the everyday life within the IRC community. How would you define the atmosphere on the platforms of communication? Did you make friends, enemies? What makes you stay (if you do) when you are not engaged in an operation? Does drama often take place? The seventh batch contains probing, potentially bias-inducing questions, and comes at the end of the interview. It asks the

respondents about their view on the collective identity of Anonymous: Do you think you share anything with fellow Anons? Do you think they all have something in common? Do you think there are different types of Anon in terms of skills/favoured actions /values? Do you think that Anonymous is an idea or a community? What makes people work together? The interview closes by asking the respondents their opinion on the interview and if they have something to add to the discussion.

In all, 25 interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews in time ranged from forty-five minutes to eight hours (during a span of three days), and the average length was three hours. In text, the added total of interview transcripts is of 250,000 words, which equates to 620 A4 pages full, Times New Roman font, font size twelve, and single spacing.

Through random encounters and snowballing, I was able to find a heterogeneous population localised in different periods and sections of Anonymous. I wanted to find Anons that had been present in the three main families of Anonymous described in chapter 2.1. Around a third were channers before joining Chanology or Ubiquitous, six were Chanologists, and the rest were from different parts of Ubiquitous, from ‘Operation Payback’ to ‘Operation Ferguson’. For security reasons I do not give a detailed descriptions of the collective actions performed by the respondents.

In the transcripts, all the Anons who were thoroughly interviewed were made anonymous to protect their identity (e.g., they were assigned a number (e.g., ‘Anon1’). Those that I quote and with whom I have not had a thorough discussion, for instance a few lines during a conversation in a public IRC channels, are simply named ‘Anon’, or named with a letter (consent for quoting them was given). A line beginning by a star (“\*”) denotes an action command, where users on IRC want to signify that they are doing something. For instance, it is common in the #agora channel of the AnonNet server to ‘snuggle’ friends when they arrive:

```
<Z> ohai phsphr
<phsphr> hey z
* phsphr snuggles z
<sylvian> ohai Z o/
* Z snuggles phsphr
<Z> ohai sylvian
* Z snuggles sylvian
* sylvian snuggles Z
```

It is common in IRC to divide a sentence or thought into several lines to speed up the reading process. In my quotes, I indicate a change of lines with an em dash (‘—’). I do not correct the grammar when citing, unless the sentence is difficult to understand. Mistyping is a part of IRC culture. To mistype a word sometimes gives a specific meaning or is part of the vernacular. Also, the degree of correctness of typing gives clues on the mood and situa-

tion of the writers, whether they are calm, thoughtful, angry, in a hurry, and so on. For instance, below is an excerpt of a discussion in which a user is told that he will be banned from a channel for a day. The user then comes to the individual who made the decision to ban him.

<A> Okay, so it came down to remove you from op\_\_\_ for the next day. [...] The reason is because of the media interactions that have been going on the past 2 days. [...] The short and long of it is that you should have been keeping in communication with everyone else about the media items you've been doing and not making unilateral decisions on it. [...]

One can see that the text is well written, with no grammar mistakes, and shows a calm, almost administrative tone. It connotes authority and the will to rationally explain a situation. A state of mind the other user is far from sharing.

<B> so tell whoever your faggot leaders are to suck my dick—[C] [administrator of the channel] is Founder on [IRC server]  
<A> Actually, [C] is where this came from.  
<B>Doubtful [...] —ya i have been where the FUCK have you all been? [...]thats a good quesiton why the FUCK am I out here alone?

The decent typing of B falters when he confronts the originator of the decision, showing a growing anger and frustration. It is answered with laconic, minimalistic answers, words shortened or missing, showing that C is probably busy somewhere else and that the matter does not require all of his/her attention.

<C> why r u talking to the media  
<B> they are asking about Twitter storm  
<C> fuck ur Twitter storm [...]  
<B> i relay exactly what was said in the video—ya know what bro, if youre not gonna take responsibitly for telling me to lead [...]  
<C> helping u?—don't sit her en abuse me [...] no talk to media—24 hour ban  
<B> now yoreu pissed bc i have 9000 fucking ppl asking [...]—dYOU IDDN THAVE TIME TO HELP ME—risk my goddamn necjk for you—you peice of shit [...]—i RESPETED you

This shows that typos are important to understand the mood and the situation of a user, and are therefore to be kept in transcripts.

### 6.2.3. Document Analysis

There are three types of document analysed: forum discussions, 4chan and other image boards threads, and the wiki 'Encyclopedia dramatica'.

I analysed discussions in the Chanology forum ‘WhyWeProtest.net’ and the Ubiquitous ‘anonnews.org’. Some threads concern what Anonymous is supposed to do and what it is supposed to be; in these discussions data can be found about CICDs, and it also permits to see collective identity construction processes, how CICDs are constructed through discussions, how they relate to one another (if some Anons oppose one another because they hold incompatible CICDs for instance), and how tensions that concern them are handled. The number of discussions is very high, on the order of several tens of thousands. I selected the texts to read and analysed first through keyword search, for instance ‘Anonymous is...’. I added progressively other keywords while I was refining my model and found new CICDs, for instance ‘organisation’ or ‘fun’. I also selected discussion randomly to discover potential new categories. I analysed around 60 discussions, and a research assistant analysed 35 discussions on his side. These discussions took place from 2008 to 2014.

The second type of document is the set of articles contained in the wiki ‘Encyclopedia Dramatica’ ([encycopediadramatica.se](http://encycopediadramatica.se)) that is, as explained in section 5.3.2, a repository of the Anonymous culture. As a wiki, articles are written communally, so that they show meanings that have usually been agreed by several people, actively (writing and modifying the text) or passively (not modifying the text after reading). As such, they are good candidates for being collective identity contents. Self-defining articles are particularly interesting, for instance the references ‘Anonymous’, ‘4chan’ and ‘Chanology’. I found a dozen articles of interest. Additionally, I used Dramatica to learn about some definitions of the Anonymous vernacular and the meaning of popular cultural artefacts I had no previous knowledge of.

Finally, between observation and document analysis, the study of 4chan is a direct experience of the channer culture in the making. It is observation because conversations and creation of cultural artefacts happens synchronously, under the eye of the user. It is also document analysis since, with its ephemeral working, transmission of cultural artefacts is done by their endless reposting on the image board. A good source to understand the collective identity of the channer branch of Anonymous is the study of ‘banners’, images that appear on the top of every 4chan pages. They are selected by the administration of the image board during contests where anyone can submit their picture. They are intended to represent the ‘zeitgeist’ of all channels and the display of popular memes. During my ethnography I visited 4chan daily.

#### 6.2.4. Respondent Feedback

Respondent feedback, also called “member validation”, “member tests of validity” (ISA 2011, §2.3.2), and “respondent validation” (American\_anthropological\_association 2009, 3), consists in asking the re-

spondents to give feedback on the researcher's work. It helps both to check the validity of the researcher's claims (as long as one does keep a critical distance towards the respondent's assertions) and to gather new data on the respondent's point of view.

Positivist sociology and structural anthropology have usually considered that the point of research was to discover what is hidden from the respondent's representation of reality (Wiseman 1979). However, since the 1970s, phenomenological approaches focus on what actors are making of reality. In this perspective, the validity of the researcher's finding lies in the recognition of the respondent of his own interpretation of the world (*ibid.*). Lincoln and Guba (1985, 314) describe it as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility".

After a period of enthusiasm for respondent feedback, several authors have relativised its efficacy by underlining the potential flaws of the methods. Respondent feedback is not devoid of practical issues and can lead to serious bias. It is uncertain whether the participant will read the work (or read it fully) and with the concentration required to give a sound review. They may focus on matters that are not of primary interest to the researcher, or misinterpret it. Commentaries can be ambiguous and difficult to interpret. They can be distorted by the positive or negative relationships between researcher and respondents, or if the respondents are involved in strategic action, especially with respect to political terms (Emerson and Pollner 1988). Taking this into consideration, Emerson and Pollner recommend not to take respondent feedback as a tool for validation but as new data, i.e. "the ways in which members construct a response to a novel event—a researcher's representation of member's reality" (190).

An important part of this work is phenomenological in that the subjective dimension of collective identity is examined, i.e. the construction of cognitive definitions. When the goal of research is to give an account of the worldview of respondents, the difference between feedback as validation and feedback as data is little. In this case, to take feedback as a validity tool is to consider the feedback as without bias. Taking it as data, is to believe that the feedback can be distorted or that it cannot be fully comprehended by the researcher. The current trend in academia is to consider feedback more as data than as a credibility tool: feedback is not to be taken at face value, but reflect one's judgment over others. However, if enough feedback consistently gives the same judgment, then feedback can be considered as a credibility check.

In this research I was not very successful in getting respondent feedback, and only three Anons reviewed part of my work. Feedback was positive concerning the overall work. Among other things, two Anons criticised a chronology that I had constructed regarding the evolution of organisation and anonymity, which was for them too simplistic: different practices existed at the same time, superimposing one another. After checking this argument with other respondents, I modified my analysis in accordance with this new finding.

### 6.3. Experience in the field

*I love to be quoted by academics!*

*Anon*

*go away you fucking fed*

*Anon*

Many Anonymous users meet, talk, and interact using the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) protocol on which participant observation was conducted. Finding the IRC server addresses do not take more than a couple of Google queries. These servers are open and anyone can join. Some channels are private for matters of privacy, tactics, and security. A typical Anonymous IRC server is composed of several thematic channels. On the most popular server, a hundred public channels exist, but only about twenty of them are active. A server always contains a ‘main’ channel dedicated to general discussions; it is usually also used for newsgathering and horseplay. Other channels are commonly dedicated to the diverse operations Anonymous is involved in or have linguistic or national themes. Usually one channel is dedicated to the education of newcomers. They can learn how IRC works, what is the basic working of Anonymous, and how to become anonymous (in the literal sense) on the internet. Many channels are ‘sleepers’: users are always connected to these channels but hardly interact within them. Anonymous often reacts to events, and these channels are here to offer a ready-made platform when an event concerning the operation ‘wakes up’ the users. Coleman (2014) describes Anonymous IRC as an always shape-shifting labyrinth. Indeed, one finds oneself discovering new rooms that permits the meeting of new people who in turn will give you access to other rooms, and so on. People who facilitate most the work of the researcher are connectors, those who will present you to others they think will be of interest for you.

The best thing to do when arriving in a new electronic field is to ‘lurk’, i.e. to observe the practices on a platform before beginning to interact to avoid making a faux pas. For instance, this approach allows one to realise that what could be considered as very aggressive discussions are in fact friendly and that insults and rude comments are characteristic of informal conversation in Anonymous. The vernacular in Anonymous IRC is rich. It originates from the Anonymous counterculture and, in some places, from the ‘hacker’ culture, notably the knowledge of the functioning of free software operating systems, the different tools and techniques to remain anonymous on the internet, the working of the deep web and bitcoins, and means of electronic disturbance. I was familiar with 4chan before my entrée in IRC servers, so that I already knew parts of Anonymous counterculture. It is not diffi-

cult to get the basics of hacker culture and one does not need to become an expert to follow and participate in a conversation.

What did I do in IRC servers? I participated in the discussions that are part of the everyday life of these platforms. I also helped newcomers to understand the rules of the community and to be anonymous on the internet. In addition, I participated in the brainstorming and administering of a few operations and channels. From December 2012 to December 2015, I was present in four servers almost daily, sometimes staying there 16 hours a day. A couple of times I was offline for a week, but most of the time I was connected for eight hours and actively discussing for three hours every day. The reader needs to keep in mind that being active on a channel does not mean that one has one's eyes fixed on the IRC client. Most people multitask. IRC can be a background activity, a bit like listening to the radio while working. When a conversation needs complete focus, one can put all of one's attention on IRC.

Most people encountered were benevolent to me and my work. Some were happy that I conducted research because they thought Anonymous was suffering from a skewed and negative public representation, largely because of what they considered to be the incompetence or even ill will of journalists (for a review of newspapers' reception of Anonymous, see Klein (2015)). A few were also frustrated by the accounts of Parmy Olsson and Gabriella Coleman, who were sometimes thought to focus too much on one part of the movement at the expense of others, or writing too much on the local celebrities and their personal stories instead of the whole movement. For them, my work could potentially counterbalance these shortcomings and thus offer the public a more objective view of Anonymous. Three persons reacted negatively to my work and criticised my presence. I felt no field fatigue at the exception of the latters, irritated notably at the already marked flow of journalists and scholars coming and going for short periods of time. Nevertheless, overall the reception was positive. Alongside activism, people meet in IRC channels for social bonding and to exchange jibes, so that spending time in the field is an agreeable experience. I had the luck to be adopted by a couple of affinity groups who gave me foster homes, long-lasting friendships, and benevolent help. Emotional attachment is as nourishing as it is straining when friends are in disarray. First, some Anons face state repression, and it was not rare to hear that an Anon and friend had his apartment raided, his computer confiscated, himself arrested and interrogated, awaiting trial, or put in jail. Second, there is also a prominence of damaged lives in Anonymous, people on the brink of poverty, or who have mental illnesses, or who are suicidal. It is difficult to know whether Anonymous, because it is internet-mediated, attracts persons of such states of mind, or if anonymity gives people more opportunities to share their fragilities and most of us are, offline, unaware of the sufferings of our neighbours. I talk more about friendship with respondents in section 6.4.3 concerning ethics.



## 6.4. Ethical concerns and security

*Harden your kernel with some patch sets and setup rbac...  
then try an secure your wap (the best u can) an such...*

*Anon25*

Long gone is the time when a researcher could stalk family men having sexual relations with male prostitutes in public toilets, write down their number plate, and knock at their door to ask for an interview (Humphreys (1975). Today, consent, privacy, and security of the respondents are prerequisites when conducting a study, and most of the time the approval of an ethical council is needed. In my case my project was assessed and approved by my academic department. Several organisations, academic and others, publish guidelines of ethical conduct to follow. Some are specific to internet research, for instance the Association of Internet Researcher recommendations on ethics (<http://goo.gl/rvTV7a>) and the Research Ethics Guideline for internet Researchers of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities in Norway (<http://goo.gl/sS8XkC>). Ethical guidelines are similar on core points. The general purpose of these guidelines is to ensure the safety and well being of the participants. All recommendations cannot be listed here, so only the main principles and those that are of interest with respect to the present study are mentioned. The main principles include respecting the wish for privacy of the respondents by obtaining their consent and informing them of the purpose of the research (ESRC 2010, 29). Anonymity also guarantees privacy (ibid., 3) and it is needed for the security of the respondents, so that they are not harmed by any information that could be leaked to the public (ISA 2011, §2.3.2). This is necessary, especially when the respondent acts in illegal or morally prohibited ways. The researcher must also be careful not to harm its field (American\_anthropological\_association 2009, 3), such as by disturbing the field by its presence and create tensions. The knowledge the researcher publishes should be truthful (ibid.) and not have a harming effect on the community (ibid., 2). If possible, the knowledge should be beneficial to the community (ibid.). Guidelines for online research apply these rules to online situations. Below, the guidelines written by Professor Bruckman (2002) are applied to the present work.

### 6.4.1. Consent and informing:

#### **Participant observation in IRC servers**

I asked the administrators (also called ‘operators’) if I could perform research on their IRC servers. Ideally, all participants should have the right to accept or refuse consent. The problem in IRC is that there are often a large

number of people, many are not following the conversation, and there is a high turnover rate, which prevents from asking the consent of all actors. To limit this problem, I have publicly presented myself in each server. Further, I talked on a regular basis about my research so that new people following the discussion would become aware of my position and be informed of the study. I did get in trouble with a couple of authority figures on AnonOps. When I first arrived in AnonOps, I was unaware of the decisional structure of the server, and I thought that getting the permission to conduct research from a few operators was sufficient. In fact, all important decisions such as this one, on AnonOps, must be taken by the server owner, the person who own the hardware on which the IRC runs. Different servers have different policies. In other servers, the consent of one or a few high administrator is sufficient. In some other servers, important administrators have a veto right. In some instances, the decision process is simply cryptic.

After I publicised parts of my results after half a semester, the server owner of AnonOps took knowledge of my work, was irritated, mainly because I had not asked him/her specifically for permission. S/he then requested that I do not disturb the server with my research, more specifically that I do not ask for interviews or ask questions in the public channels. Nine months before the publication of my thesis I submitted a rough draft to one of the public channels. A high operator read it and found in the methods part of the draft that I had asked the server owner's permission to conduct such methods. The paragraph concerned only the servers where I received authorisation from the owners, but in the draft this information was not specified. Thus, a misunderstanding ensued because of a lack of clarity on my part. The operator interpreted the available information in the thesis that I was talking for AnonOps as well and therefore that I had lied. The operator then began a campaign of reprisal on the public channels. Soon my supervisor received five emails complaining about my behaviour.

One thing that I was guilty of and which upset several AnonOps users, is that I had kept logs (archives) of public conversations. It was not an acceptable practice on AnonOps and it had been a failure from my part not to be aware of this unwritten rule. The attitude towards logging is different from one server to the next. For instance, the three servers on which I concentrated my research have no problem with logging public channels. The logic of these three servers is that law enforcement is probably already logging discussions, so that if others do it, it does not add any risk.

<Anon1> logging is a part of IRC.—ir[c] is not a secure medium—you should never say anything in a channel that you don't want to be repeated to anyone else  
(in another server, answering to my request to log):  
<[operator]> lol thats fine, log what you like—people are getting logged anyways—may as well have someone put it to use—fed [i.e police] bots [i.e. software] passively logging all the time

In another IRC, a server owner had fully embraced the logic. S/he was him/herself logging public channels, publishing them, and publicising the fact.

<[user]> why are you keeping logs  
<[server owner]> because 1. quite a lot of good information is being shared in here that would benefit from being preserved—2. if you do not wish things to be logged, you probably shouldn't be sharing them in a public channel in the first place, especially not in a channel where obviously logbots [programs disguising as users to log channels] are present—(because really, there are at least 5 bots in this channel that have never said a word)  
<user> ok

Because of the impossibility to prevent people to log and the impossibility to know that people log, archiving conversations on AnonOps is a practice that is frowned upon but that cannot be averted through technical or social means. But it seems to be somewhat tolerated among people of high techno-social<sup>2</sup> standing:

<Anon1> look—it's like this—almost 95% of all other IRC's logging is standard practice—and also encouraged—logs of many large channels are posted to the web for posterity—and for solutions to problems—EVERYONE at AnonOps thinks that logging is bad.—here's [the] thing, lots of people do it, including the server admins there.  
<sylvian> Yes it's interesting that it looks like a taboo thing—It's deemed totally forbidden yet often people do it  
<Anon7> It looks taboo but nobody (well mostly nobody) ever give [well-known Anon] shit for logging, editing, reposting, editing again, posting again, etc. I have seen [well-known anon] edit one "log" at least 3 times with a new pastebin [i.e. publication] for each one

Finally, a rule I violate is the need for the parent's consent for minors (Bruckman 2002, §5.5). This violation occurs because of the strict practice of anonymity in the channels. I cannot ask an Anon if she is a minor as it would disclose information on her identity. To adhere to this guideline would mean to abandon participatory observation on IRC servers.

## Interviews

In interviews, consent is conferred by asking in IRC to read the consent form (available in Appendix 3) and sign it electronically by writing 'I have read and I accept'. The consent form informs the respondent about my identity, the goal of the study, and the respondent's rights.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to 'techno-social' as the fact that persons of authority on electronic platforms are often given technical privileges such as operatorship.

## **Documentary analysis**

There is no need for consent if information is published publicly (Bruckman 2002, §1.1). Therefore, in my case, I decided that consent was not required for using cultural artefact published on the web and archived forum discussions.

### **6.4.2. Security and anonymity**

Pseudonyms must be treated as real names, even with the carefulness most Anons apply to conceal their offline identity. Indeed, nicknames can be retraced to an offline identity (Bruckman 2002, §6.1.1.1). Also, people usually keep a stable handle and do not want to be quoted from private interviews (ibid., §6.1.1.2). Special care must be applied to insure anonymity because we deal with potential illegal actions. Besides changing the handles of the respondents in my transcripts, I try to apply a strong network security to my computer to avoid data theft. Further, all transcripts have been stored with the strongest encryption. A few Anons helped me to secure my data as much as possible. The transcripts are also uploaded to the servers of my qualitative data analysis tool Dedoose. Dedoose claims that the data are safe and encrypted, and it is used by academics working on very sensitive data such as medical research. To add another layer of security, I deleted from the transcripts details of what could potentially have led to identification (e.g., geographical or temporal information). Finally, transcripts will not be copied and shared though fellow researchers can read them on my computer while I am present. It is a breach of standards that sources should be checked easily by fellow academics, but I think it is needed considering the sensitive matter of security in the field I worked in. Indeed, in Anonymous, to be ‘doxed’, that is to have one’s identity released, often means social death in the field: people do not take you seriously anymore and you become a potential target of harassment by trolls and foes. It also opens the possibility to be ‘v&’ (‘vanned’), i.e. be arrested by the police and prosecuted.

### **6.4.3. Harm and benefits**

As noted above, the presence of the ethnographer can bother or disrupt the field. I prefer to leave channels if tensions arise because of my presence, which happened once when I was criticised on AnonOps for keeping logs. Then, the researcher should think of how to benefit the community. I think that I can help the community by offering a better understanding of what Anonymous is to the public, compared with the journalistic and academic literature. As explained above, a common criticism within Anonymous users is that they are not understood, mainly because journalists and some academics present a skewed image of Anonymous. Several have actively helped me

with this idea in mind by giving their own version of the story. Finally, I would claim that the very participation to IRC discussions can be a plus for the community. Using wits, exchanging information, opening one's heart, and making participants laugh adds life to channels and helps to entertain its users.

#### 6.4.4. On friendship

Finally, I would like to come back to the question of the relationship of the participant observant with the population. The model of the marginal native seen section 6.2.1 is problematic when it comes to the question of friendship in the field. I became friends with several Anons during the three-year research project. Close friendship is, as stated above, problematic because of the risk of losing reflexivity and of 'going native'. In addition, it raises ethical and practical questions. Ethnographers are divided on the consequences of friendship with natives. Some (Spradley 1979, 78, Marcus 2001, 525, Russell, Touchard, and Porter 2002) consider that the ethnographer can develop emotional bounds to some extent, relationships known as 'rapport'. Rapport "engages trust and sentiment while holding them at arm's length", which "does not entail the same level of loyalty or potential bias as friendship" (Mathias 2010, 114). In the literature on rapport, the main concern is instrumental, i.e. whether friendship can be useful for the research. There is no consensus on this matter, but most agree that friendship can give an easier access to and deeper understanding of the field (Powdermaker 1966, 261, 262, 290, Hendry 1992, Watson 1992, 142, 145, Salamone and Grindal 1995). There are also ambiguous answers (Foster 1979, Hendry 1992, 180-181), and negative answers that underline the risk of 'going native' and as well as developing judgmental bias (Rabinow 1977, Crick and Okely 1992, from Mathias 2010).

Recent trends of ethnography (e.g., feminist and action research) have underlined this exploitative trait and stressed the need for the researcher to be beneficial to the field in return (e.g., by honouring the life of oppressed groups, publicizing the acts of liberatory movements, contributing to the field's self-reflexivity) (Gatenby and Humphries 2000). These schools of thought have emphasised collaboration as an equal partnership between researcher and respondents. In this logic, friendship is not only a methodological strength but it is also an ethical solution to give back to the field by offering one's intimacy, affection, solidarity, and understanding of "*being with and for the other, not looking at*" (de Laine 2000, 16, author's highlights). This reciprocity is the position I adopted during my fieldwork.

Rapportship, the vision of close (but not too close) relationships for the sake of the research is ethically disquieting. Nothing ensures that the other party will make the difference between rapportship and friendship. When offering rapportship, friendship may be offered by the respondent, resulting

in an unbalanced relationship. A best case scenario is one in which the researchers actually care to point out to the respondents that they are only offering rapportship, and that the emotional response should not go ‘too far’ so that it stays in a relation of reciprocity. Eventually, the problem is pervasive to all friendships, and friendship weaved during participant observation is a particular and complex case. In his *Nicomachean ethics* (books VIII and IX), Aristotle considers that friendship is an equalitarian relationship in which both friends are attracted to each other for the same rationale. Friendship can be based on three reasons. It can be utility, where both agents derive some material benefit from each other. It can be pleasure, where friends are drawn to each other because of attractive qualities (e.g., charming, good looks, and kindness). The third reason is virtue, where friends recognise each other as good persons and like each other because of who they are. This is what Aristotle calls true friendship. These reasons are not exclusive to one another, but friendships based on the two first reasons are usually short-lived because needs and desires do not last.

The ethnographer who arrives in the field ties relationships for instrumental reasons. Relationships are rapportship, non-equalitarian, and the other can answer positively to the researcher’s requests out of benevolence, or because she wants her voice to be heard or for other instrumental reasons. From this foundation, friendship sometimes grows. It happens that researcher/respondent relationships are developed out of reciprocal utility; if the researcher uses the respondent to obtain information for the study, the respondent can also use the researcher. For instance, I developed strong links with a group of Chanologists who were very helpful. For some, it was done not only out of kindness but also because they had been frustrated by the recently published book of Coleman (2014), which presented little information about Chanology:

<A> true that biella [Coleman] recognised she didnt talk about Chanology as much as she could or should have, still  
<sylvian> She did not expand on the subject indeed  
<B> “expand on the subject” ?  
\*B rolls eyes  
<B> skipped it  
<B> she was too happy with her friends of lulzsec<sup>3</sup>.

In the mind of some Chanologists, my work could help to balance the situation and give voice to Chanology. In this sense, I was used, but it should not mean we have to be cynical about this particular case. To help friends gives us a sense of agency. That was the case in my work and it also served to

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<sup>3</sup> Famous splinter cell of Anonymous, see p. 140.

fulfil my ethical wish for reciprocity. To have people counting on me to tell their story meant that I was not only doing the research for my own benefits and those interested in my work, but also for those being researched. This added another meaning to my work. Having respondents wishing for a specific outcome of the research does not mean that it is skewing the results as long as the researcher is aware of it.

Researcher-respondent friendships can also be constructed out of pleasure in addition to utility. Some people who first helped me out of kindness, curiosity or instrumentality became my friends out of the pleasure that resulted from our mutual conversations, and eventually for what we were as individuals. But the cohabitation between the original, instrumental reason for meeting Anons and the care for one another that was developed out of these interactions has sometimes been problematic because the sincerity of the researcher is sometimes questioned:

<Anon23> hi  
<sylvian> Hi! :)  
\*Anon23 snuggles sylvian  
\*sylvian snuggles Anon23  
<Anon23> sylvian, are you going to leave us when you finish your work?  
<B> Id be sad :S  
<sylvian> Oh Anon23 we're bond emotionally now, I don't think so  
<Anon21> Nice—you never know  
<sylvian> <3  
<Anon21> <3  
<A> sylvian is the poor man's biella [Coleman] he will [...] leave you once he's finished  
<sylvian> D:<<<<  
<A> jk [i.e. just kidding] ;)

## 6.5. Representativeness and generalisability

*sylvian please—don't stereotype a culture*

*Anon23*

The problem of representativeness (whether the studied sample is representative of the target population) and of generalisability (whether the findings concerning the sample can be applied to the population) in qualitative studies has never been unequivocally answered (the same is true of quantitative

studies<sup>4</sup>). One strong argument in favour of generalisability is that qualitative analysis is not concerned with the property of individuals, but about social processes and structures considered pervasive to most similar situations in a given field (Gobo 2004, 452): “there is a body of social practices [...] which don’t change much, even though the people who perform them are continually replaced through the ordinary demographic process of birth, death, and emigration” (Becker 2000, 6). The possible generalisation of studied practices, relations, and structures is determined by their variances in the social field, which is the number of forms they can take. Variance, by definition, cannot be known before the research, as it is research that uncovers the variance. One can only hope that the structures studied are relatively invariant. Goffman’s work on social embarrassment (Goffman 1966), Whyte (1943) study on social organisation and leadership in a group, and van Dijk (1983, from Gobo 2004, 453) work on the cognitive processes on racial prejudice are studies that are successful and generalisable because of the low variance of the studied structures.

To make sure that all forms of the relevant social practices are comprehended, a general method used by qualitative research is the saturation of data. There is a “diminishing return to a qualitative sample” (Mason 2010, 1), which means that new data give less and less information concerning the researched matter. Data saturation occurs when new data obtained become redundant and no new insights are achieved. Saturation gives a good indication that the researcher has reached representativeness. Even if, until the end, new details were appearing from the data, I could reach saturation concerning CICDs, their expression and their relations with one another. Those are of relatively low variance, in the sense that there are limited choices concerning what to think and what to do in relation to collective identity.

The main weakness of my research is that I did my coding alone (my research assistant helped me to code some of the data but he was influenced by the categories I had already created). Punch (1998) advises to work in a small group. Alone, it is easier to skew the recognition of categories during open coding because of one’s subjective judgment. It is a limitation of the medium used, because a PhD thesis should be conducted alone.

Finally, there are some aspects of Anonymous that will not be covered in this work. For instance, the present work does not depict the daily life and

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the impossibility to know precisely the size of the population, the very large samples needed for multiple variable analysis, the non-random clustered nature of a population, and the phenomenon of non-response (Gobo 2004, 440-442) should make every social scientists humble vis-a-vis any claim for representativity. Same thing with generalisability: sound statistical significance tests such as phi, Cramer’s V, or Pearson’s C are seldom employed, which can be contrasted with the overused chi-square test, which efficacy on social science data is limited (ibid. 451).



individual relationships within the Anonymous network. The accounts of passions and dramas could fill bookshelves, and some works of vulgarisation such as Olson's (2012) cover a few of them; but they do not directly relate to the collective identity of the movement. Further, this work is not a sociology of Anonymous participants. Asking for social background is a potential security risk from the perspective of the participant because of possible illegal activities. In addition, asking questions related to identity would not have been well-received because there is a 'don't ask don't tell' policy on the matter. It is not problematic since the knowledge of the social background of the participants is not needed for the assessment of collective identity.

## 6.6. Conclusion

My analytical model was constructed through a grounded approach, in which theory is constructed from observation. Grounded theory is performed in three phases. The first is open coding, where the researcher constructs conceptual categories from her data. It permitted me to verify the presence of the CICDs foreseen by Melucci and to identify other CICDs. The second phase of grounded theory is axial coding, where relevant codes are interconnected to one another to create a set of logical relations. Most of these logical relations were present in the model of Melucci, that I had chosen early during my first observation, and axial coding permitted me to confirm these phenomena as well as to find new ones. The third phase is selective coding, it is the selection of codes and relations to construct a new theory. In my case, selective coding resulted in the extended model of Melucci's collective identity and the results to the research question that are described in the general conclusion.

The present research is based on an ethnography. I used a triangulation of methods composed of participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and respondent feedback. Participant observation is the central and defining method of ethnography as it permits the immersion and participation of the researcher into the everyday life of the community she studies. Interviews give a closer access to an individual's point of view and a more in-depth knowledge of her experience. With document analysis I studied wiki articles collaboratively written, forum conversations, and discussions on 4chan. It permitted me to see the process of construction of collective identity. Finally, respondent feedback permitted me to get additional data on the points of view of the respondent, and to verify my claims.

My experience in the field was largely positive; most people were welcoming, and either neutral or interested, and some thought my research would be useful to give a clearer picture of Anonymous to the public. Participant observation took place on several IRC servers of Anonymous, where I

participated in the daily discussions, helped newcomers, helped to prepare some collective actions and participated in some.

Ethical matters were taken into account concerning consent, concerning privacy and security of the participants (which has to be taken with extra care because of the legal risks some respondents face), the harms and benefits of the study, and the matter of friendship. The chapter ended with the question of representativeness and generalisability. The argument in favour of the possibility for qualitative research to attain them is that the researcher aims to uncover social processes and structures that have low variance and are pervasive to similar situations. Saturation of data is a means to know if all relevant social practices have been comprehended, and it is something that was achieved in this study. The main weakness of this work is that I performed my coding process alone, therefore my research is exposed to potential subjective bias. Finally, some aspects of Anonymity are left off: the personal relationships between Anons are not recounted. Due to the practice of anonymity in the field, the sociological and psycho-sociological methods were not used.

## 7. Analysis

Acting as Anonymous implies applying certain meanings to collective actions. These meanings are shared and have been constructed collectively. They are what constitute the collective identity of Anonymous, the ideas that are expressed through actions performed in its name. Each section of this chapter studies a set of these components of collective identity, what Melucci calls collective identity cognitive definitions (CICDs). The CICDs have been inducted from the ethnographic method and the coding process proposed by grounded theory, while the coding process itself was influenced by Melucci's model of collective identity construction. Section 7.1 concerns countercultural components, such as the deviant behaviour of offense and parrhesia. Section 7.2 analyses Anonymous' multipolar action system and the two personifications that represent its poles, the trickster and the hero. Section 7.3 deals with the definitions related to its organisation and decision-making processes. Section 7.4 looks at anonymity and the development of an ethics of self-effacement. Section 7.5 concludes with the idea of universality, the definition of Anonymous as an entity that cannot be defined.

### 7.1. The chans counterculture: misfits, offenders, and parrhesiasts

*Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.*

*Anon, quoting Oscar Wilde*

Anonymous first emerged as a counterculture, a community centred on the practice of deviances, which are violations of socially accepted norms. In Melucci's classification of collective actions (section 3.1.1 and Appendix 2), deviances are system-breaching (they violate social norms), consensual (no conflict against an identified adversary), and aggregative (the "temporal and spatial proximity of the repetitive multiplication of individual behaviour" (Melucci 1996, 23)). Anonymous breaches norms at the level of the life-world, which is "the level of social relations within which the basic requirements of social life are maintained and reproduced through interaction and communication" (Melucci 1996, 27), and which contains the rules that per-

mit proper communication and interactions between individuals. This section first shows how Anonymous constructed an ironic self-definition of being misfits, and then explains the deviances of offense and parrhesia, as well as how Anonymous constructed an alternative lifeworld based on these deviances.

### 7.1.1. Misfits

First, 4chan users cultivate and play on the idea of being misfits and outcasts. It is an idea born out of individual experience and an appropriation of stereotypes commonly held and portrayed by the media concerning people who are considered to spend too much time on the internet. Auerbach (2012) assumes that 4chan's /b/ (its main, general channel) is populated by a cultural underclass, those who do not have a voice in mass media and mass social media. In essence, it is a "collective gathering of those who are alienated, disaffected, voiceless, and just plain unsocialized" (and it is, at least, what /b/ wants to show). This is the case, for instance, of young channers who do not benefit from great popularity in school or elsewhere, and who prefer instead to socialise on the internet and on the chans (4chan and other image boards). Appendix 5 shows a comics that describes how the typical channer becomes disappointed with the world outside and finds a supporting community on 4chan. In the next excerpt, one user explains how he interprets the common use in Anonymous of the suffix '-fag' (diminutive of 'faggot') to qualify someone (to be an 'anonfag', 'eurofag', 'brit(ish)fag', 'oldfag', 'newfag', 'gayfag', 'straightfag', and so on) as the empowering adoption of an insult he had been subjected to.

Fag has been stolen back from the jocks who used to call us geeky computer dorks in high school [...]. You fags. Buncha fags. We were fags to them and though I did not turn out gay, some of my friends did. [...] Look at who you hang out with and ask yourself if the popular kids who don't think for themselves would consider you fags. Then defuse it by owning it. (WhyWeProtest, March 2008)

Supposedly, then, Anonymous is populated by self-proclaimed introverts, losers, dorks, recluses, old virgins, racists, sexists, perverts, paedophiles, neurotics, autistics, suicidal persons, etc. It is expressed in a very public manner through the publication on 4chan of banners weaving on this theme (see figure 9). As stated in p. 93, banners express collective identity in the sense that they are submitted by users and chosen by administrators to be representative of the spirit of 4chan.



Figure 9. 4chan banners.

The idea that Anonymous is a collection of social misfits is an early CICD in Anonymous, constituted in the first years of 4chan. It shows that early on 4chan is not just a platform where people come to watch and post images. Rather, it is a place where people begin to recognise themselves in each other, creating a feeling of collective identity that originates from shared per-

sonal experiences, a shared position in the social system, and a primordial sameness that is discovered and assumed through social interactions. This collective identity component is then understood as the shared characteristics of individuals. However, 4chan is not a support group based on people complaining about their life and status of outcast: as with everything else, Anons cannot take themselves too seriously, and the status of misfit is often used ironically and played on.

### 7.1.2. Offenders

*its important to keep that attitude so nothing stays sacred*

*Anon17*

Quickly after the inception of 4chan in 2003 and by the will of its owner, the administrators of the image board applied a more liberal moderation policy (i.e. the level of censorship applied to content deemed inappropriate) compared with other electronic platforms. Virtually, any type of picture, discussion, or planning for collective action was accepted, with the sole exception of paedo-pornographic photographs. Because of this lack of restriction, 4chan soon became a ‘free space’ (Evans and Boyte 1986), a place “removed from the physical and ideological control of those in power, [...] in which people can develop counterhegemonic ideas and oppositional identities” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 288). Anonymous created a counterculture that relied on the lack of moderation.

This lack of moderation first supported a custom of offense, i.e. the posting of shock value material, such as offensive speech image macros (see figure 10), with racist and sexist comments, gore and pornographic images, the common use of rowdy language and insults during conversations, and the common use of flaming and trolling. Flaming refers to insulting people while trolling is a more subtle technique in which the troll manipulates a conversation to create a dispute (Sharma et al. 2012, 2). Offense is a deviance at the level of the lifeworld, which is the system of commonly understood rules for day-to-day interactions. It violates considerations of politeness and propriety that would normally be expected during ordinary discussions.



Figure 10. Shock-value image macro.

Offense has the function of producing fun, a central CICD in Anonymous as shown in section 7.2. It is also cathartic behaviour, considering the impossibility of such conduct in other fields of social life. Offense is pervasive to discussions in /b/ and other places of the submerged network. Anonymous manages to succeed in maintaining discussions by reversing norms of propriety and saturating the platforms with obscenity and offensive speech. Anonymous allows a complete extension of offense that culminates in its normalisation. Insults and mockery are commonplace. Because of the normalisation of flaming and trolling, communication can take place undeterred, and Anonymous succeeds in keeping conversations and collaboration functional by creating an alternative lifeworld based on this normalisation of offense. Below is an excerpt of a conversation debating the different ways of life in the USA and Europe:

<A> [posting a diagram showing how the USA dominates the world economy] Butthurt [i.e. frustrated], rest of the world?—Bow before your glorious American master race.  
<B> Aren't you overcompensating for Iraq just a bit much OP?  
<A> butthurt eurofuck detected—Enjoying your muslims and mosques fag-got?—better start learning arab, nigger  
<C> I can't hear you over the sound of my free healthcare  
<D> Implying there's not cheap healthcare for people who have fucking jobs. I like my doctors to be able to make money so they'll be... Good at what they do. Also my tax rate isn't 45% plus. Your shit socialist economy grows very very sl[ow]  
<E> [After citing A] >Being this clueless about the rest of the world—What is this? A who's the most ignorant american thread?  
<F> Actually I think it's a lure the butthurt Eurofattys to stop them from shit-posting thread  
<G> [referring to <A>] trying this hard—hating this much—0/10 terrible troll  
<H> USA USA USA USA USA USA USA USA USA USA USA [...]

<I> Doesn't matter what Europe has, I'm sure Sharia law bans it anyways  
<J> implying america isn't a shithole basically third-world country which can only function because police brutality everywhere—implying america isn't half owned by the chinese due to foreign debt—implying usa doesn't have more immigrant shitskins than there are in europe—implying us of a wouldn't collapse if there was no oil for even one day—implying anyone would respect america if not for ridiculous military spending—implying "american culture" is more than shit like everything fast-food related and old mustang cars—implying america has a stable government and not just peddling puppets controlled by jews

Figure 11 shows 4chan banners related to offense as a collective identity definition.



Figure 11. 4chan banners as related to offense as a collective identity definition.

Offense as a deviance is then a collective identity definition that concerns how one acts *as* an Anonymous user *in* Anonymous platforms of communication. Section 7.2.1 describes how offense is also expressed outside of the submerged network through collective actions targeted towards the outside world.



### 7.1.3. Parrhesiasts

The third countercultural component of 4chan which has a bearing upon Anonymous' collective identity is the notion of parrhesiastic action, the expression of truth (i.e. to speak freely). The word 'parrhesia' is used here in the general sense (Wallace 2004, 222-3), entailing to dare to speak the bold truth with no consideration for the risk of shocking or hurting people<sup>5</sup>. As such, it is a violation of norms of propriety that are normally following during discussions, what is commonly referred as 'political correctness', the avoidance of topics or expressions that could make people uncomfortable. 4chan, with its practice of anonymity, is the place where one can speak the truth without fear of social stigma. Parrhesiastic expression has, like offensive expression, a therapeutic, cathartic function, where 4chan becomes a 'pressure valve' against the requirements for political correctness in daily life.

<Anon3> [originally 4chan] was just a release—from hypocrisy [...]—to have fun and truly say what you CANNOT say with your identity. [...] hypocrisy—is the day to day—political correctness—you cannot tell your boss he is a fucking faggot and should most defo [i.e. definitely] fuck himself and an hero [i.e. killing oneself]. [...] so yes, it was a release from hypocrisy...  
<sylvian> and how did it feel to be able to speak your mind?  
<Anon3> very good—it feels... like—...lightning a load

Parrhesia can be directed inward or outward: it can be telling the truth about oneself (Foucault 2009, 9), or about the world outside. In the first case, parrhesiastic speech takes the form of confessions. Posts concerning past personal abuses or current existential malaise are common.

I'm an alcoholic bipolar sex addict that prefers pornography and isolation to the company of women. When it subsides and I do "mix it up," ultimately I lead them on, hit it off, then cancel on them again and again. When I do have money, I spend it on whoever will reply on my OkCupid and they're always fat and the alcohol gives me this persona and they fuck then I go home and to work hungover and when the girl I actually like texts even if I'm not so depressed from post masturbatory brain chemicals I'm already broke from playing cool guy to the fat chicks. I hate myself and I want to die. (Anonymous posting on 4chan, June 2013).

The relation of Anonymous with the truth is ambivalent. Certainly, 4chan and other affiliated platforms are privileged places to tell the truth about

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault (2009, 12) uses a more specific definition by underlying the risk for the individual to tell the truth. This risk is hardly present in 4chan because since, under the veil of anonymity, Anonymous participants do not expose themselves to the reprisal of anyone.

oneself and others when this truth cannot be expressed elsewhere, and it is at the origin of Anonymous' great concern for the principle of freedom of speech. At the same time, truth-claims are never to be taken for granted because of anonymity and trolling: lies, fake stories, and deceitful claims are common and pervasive. This circumstance results in a situation where all truths can be told and none can be trusted. As a by-product, truth can become easier to tell when it has a chance to be interpreted as a lie. Eventually, truth and its opposite, falsehood, blend together in stylistics of post-irony, where speeches can have different layers of veracity and falsehood, irony and earnestness. The 4chan user who posts a racist claim stating that "all niggers should be deported from America" (4chan post, May 2013) is employing offensive speech and might not wish for mass deportation, but she might also hold a grudge against a category of people she lives in proximity with, and this truth is more easily told when it is exaggerated and benefits from the doubt of being a lie. The person who assures another that performing oral sex on one's male friend is just a friendly but not 'homosexual' act (so that he should do it) (4chan post, June 2013) probably jibes, but might also hint at the inadequacy of the dichotomisation of human desire.

Like offense, parrhesia as a deviance is a CICD that concerns how one acts like an Anon in the Anonymous submerged network. It will also be expressed outside of the network in directed action as described in section 7.2.

#### 7.1.4. Conclusion

Anonymous has developed a counterculture in which deviant behaviour lies at the lifeworld level of the social system. Anonymous constructs itself as a collective of misfits, a post-ironic claim originating from shared personal experiences and the play on stereotypes. The two types of deviance (offense and parrhesia) violate principles of politeness and propriety. They are the result of a liberal policy of moderation of the content in 4chan and other image boards. Offense is expressed primarily through the posting of shock-value material and the use of flaming and trolling in conversations. It is motivated by the will to have fun and by an emotionally purging need to do what cannot be done elsewhere. Offense becomes a defining feature of Anonymous, and thus part of its collective identity, and will thus be enacted in collective actions directed towards the outside as will be seen the next section. Parrhesia violates norms of propriety or 'political correctness' with the expression of the bold truth and the disregard for the possibility of hurting others. Parrhesia, like offense, is allowed because of the lack of censorship and has a cathartic function. The truth that is expressed, however, can never be fully believed owing to the lack of verifiability and the trolling habit to tell lies. Claims for truth cannot be verified, and this ends up in discussions with post-ironic stylistics, where truth, falsehood, irony, and ear-

ness are intermixed. Anonymous creates an alternative lifeworld where offensive and parrhesiastic actions are normalised, permitting interpersonal interactions.

What does it say about the collective identity of Anonymous? First, the CICD of misfit defines Anonymous as the shared experiences of the participants outside of 4chan, and the shared characteristics of their personal identity. The CICDs of offense and parrhesia are different in the sense that they refer to what one does within the submerged network, they are emergent properties of the collective. These CICDs are as well, to paraphrase Milan (2013b), based on shared experiences of the action, where the collective is defined by what one does in common within the network. Second, offense and parrhesia are some of the most common CICDs of the Anonymous network, though they tend to be less present in collective actions that are centred on activism. This is explained in the next section.

## 7.2. Trickster and hero: the construction of a multipolar action system

This section explains how Anonymous users, from project Chanology onwards, constructed a multipolar action system, the self-definition of the movement related to the configuration of its actions in terms of goals, means, and relations with its environment (see definition p. 74). This action system oscillates between two polar archetypes, which are referred to here as the ‘trickster’ and the ‘hero’ figures that have embodied the sign of Anonymous (see definition p. 80). The trickster configuration of the action system assumes the individualistic pleasure of fun as a goal, the possibility of immoral means, and a disregard for maintaining a good reputation towards the outside. The hero, by contrast, aims for social change, needs to keep an image of probity, and thus prohibits the use of harmful and immoral methods. Each collective action performed by Anonymous, however, does not have to choose between one of the poles, and it can find feasible hybrid modulations and negotiate between different requirements. First, explained is the role of fun in the Anonymous counterculture, its use in collective actions, and the construction of a trickster persona built around it. Then, the rise of assumed activism during Project Chanology and the attached construction of a hero persona and the consequential development of a multipolar action system based on trickster and hero dynamic are explained. The antagonism between these two figures, the factions they have created, and how collective actions often succeed in stabilising their positioning in the action system onto an intermediate area where tensions can be handled are described. Eventually, The CICDs that refer to the action system link the different collective actions of Anonymous as much as they divide Anonymous into identifiable factions.

This finding contributes to the understanding of the centrifugal logic of Anonymous.

### 7.2.1. Having fun: Anons as crafters, offenders, pranksters

The shift of Anonymous from a prankster to an activist collective has often been received with surprise by commentators. Coleman, for instance, describes it as a “minor miracle” (Coleman 2014, 66). This section shows how this shift from one type of collective action to the other (using the typology described in section 3.1.1) is the result of two factors: incremental changes in the characteristics of the collective actions and the fact that they are linked by the CICDs of fun, offense, and parrhesia.

4chan (and particularly /b/) is used, among other things, for the creation of an individual affect, the pleasure derived from laughter. The shared search for the same emotion gives Anons the possibility to recognise themselves in others, which strengthens the sense of community. The search for fun led Anons to collaborate and perform collective actions, as they created new opportunities to reach this aim. Fun became recognised as a CICD in the sense of what Anonymous stands for, expressed in the common maxim that “Anonymous is for the lulz” (Anon1).

Having fun as an Anonymous participant takes three main forms: the craft of cultural artefacts, offensive speech within internal platforms of communications, and collective pranks directed outside of the submerged network. The first form is a ritualistic type of collective action (consensus/system-observance/aggregation) bordering on the deviant (system-breaching) when the artefacts breach cultural norms of appropriate humour. The second form, offense, studied in section 7.1.2, is a deviant type of collective action (consensus/system-breaching/aggregation). The third form, pranking, lies between deviant and activist action. It is an exteriorised expression of offense and often of parrhesia, but it is also quasi-activist in the sense that it conflicts with a defined target over resources but lacks the conscious or assumed understanding of the possibilities of social change offered by the action (Melucci 1996, 32). Collective pranks emerge onto fully-fledged activism when the stakes are understood and assumed, and when potential change in the social system becomes one of the goals of collective action. This first occurred in 2008 with Project Chanology. From ritualistic meme-crafting to activism, there are incremental evolutions in their characteristics related to the typology of Melucci, and they all follow the collective identity definition of fun. In addition, many share offense and parrhesia. I describe below what is meme-crafting, offensive speech, and pranks.

#### **Meme-crafting**

Anonymous did not invent the internet meme (defined as a cultural artefact—image, text or video—that mutates and spreads virally between plat-

forms and people). Its ancestor, the forum ‘Something Awful’ is one of the first to develop this art, particularly the ‘image macro’, a picture with a caption (see figure 12) (anonymous 2015, 7). But 4chan rapidly became one of its main centres of production on the internet, making it especially well known and popular in youth culture.

Meme-crafting and posting can be considered a ritual, celebrating and nourishing the everyday life of the community, sustaining a sense of belonging. It is not conflictual against a particular actor and it is aggregative, a result of a collective effort but without participants recognising themselves and others as part of a concerted action. It can also be thought of as deviant in relation to ‘mainstream’ culture if the content were considered offensive. A famous ritual of 4chan is ‘Caturday’: every Saturday Anons post pictures of cats *en masse* (see figure 1).

Image boards are a good way to generate memes. An image board, 4chan included, is composed of a series of threads (pages) where images and conversations are regularly posted. Each thread has a limited lifetime in that it is ‘pushed down’ to the end of the board by newly created threads, eventually purged from the image board. Depending on the activity on the board, threads can last a few days, a few hours, or just a few minutes. This ‘moving down’ effect is compensated by a ‘moving up’ effect based on the popularity of the thread. The more people post messages within the thread, the longer its lifetime is extended. To keep contents of interest available—stories, jokes, images, etc.—Anons post them repeatedly in different threads. What ensues is a process of selection in which the most popular cultural artefacts are reproduced continually and the others disappear from the electronic platforms and from the sight and memory of the users.

A process of mutation appears at the same time: users can decide to modify the cultural artefacts they re-post, with these modifications being in their turn subjected to selection. Selections and mutations cause what appears to be a process of evolution of cultural artefacts (this occurrence has been likened to the concept of memetic evolution that was introduced by Dawkins (1976), who proposed applying genetic evolutionary processes to ideas).



Figure 12. 'Bad luck Brian' meme series. Endless creation of new meanings through text addition around an image-signifier bearing the signified of the unlucky boy archetype.

Almost all image macros created on 4chan have a humorous intent: they are crafted to produce fun for oneself and the community. Some stay in the limits of propriety and belong to a ritual type of collective action, while others display offensive content and take the system-breaching characteristic of deviance.

### Offensive speech

The topic of offensive speech was covered in section 7.1.2, so it will only be briefly described here. Offensive speech is a deviant type of collective action that consists in trolling and flaming. Additional to its cathartic function, offensive speech is performed for the individual pleasure derived from fun.

### Pranks

Offensive actions extend themselves outside of the Anonymous network through the attacks on external targets. These collective actions can be called pranks, mischievous acts put on someone for laughs. They involve, for instance, the invasion of virtual worlds or personal harassment (several examples were already developed in section 2.1.1), and became common from 2006 onwards (anonymous 2015, 10).

In Anonymous, pranks are situated between the deviant type and the activist type of collective action. There are three differences between deviant

actions performed within the submerged network and pranks. First, actions shift from aggregation to solidarity: during pranks, participants are conscious that they are acting together in one common and specific action, whereas deviances are the aggregation of individual acts. Second, pranks are oriented towards conflict. As we have seen earlier, conflict for Melucci means three things: a specific target is designated, material or symbolic resources are at stake in the conflict, and these stakes are recognised by the participants. The first requirement is always present in Anonymous' pranks and the second is present very often. When the third requirement is fulfilled, pranks can be considered as activist actions. The third difference between deviances expressed within the Anonymous network and pranks is that parrhesia, the revelation of truth, often becomes a goal. Finally, Anonymous pranks are system-breaching at the level of social relations in the sense that they cannot be regarded as proper and respectful ways of treating others; they are a continuation of the practice of offense. They also often subvert social-technical systems: mechanisms of internet surveys, options of creation of characters in virtual worlds, use of pizza delivery hotlines, black faxes, etc.

The concept of 'lulz' is an important notion in understanding pranking, trolling, and flaming. The lulz is originally a peculiar form of fun that is produced at the expense of an individual or an organisation, usually in the form of humiliation, offense, frustration, or anger. Flaming and trolling result in lulz when they attain such a result. A target that is easily offended (or a situation often leading to it) is called a 'lulzcow' (e.g., with the expression 'milking the lulzcow'). In Anonymous, the various means to attain the lulz are elevated to an art, carefully crafted to attain the best emotional result. Pranks are an expression of this art of the lulz. They are often the consequence of conscientiously prepared plans, frequently demanding time, effort, and skills from their participants (e.g., for rigging internet-based surveys and ballots), or the assembly of a large number of Anons (e.g., during raids against forums or virtual worlds). Pranks can therefore be the expression of the collective identity definitions of fun and offense directed outside of the submerged network and targeting a defined adversary.

Pranks performed by Anonymous are also often the expression of parrhesia. This extension of parrhesia towards the external world makes these pranks quasi-activist actions. Parrhesia becomes a goal, a reason for conflict. Indeed, Anonymous pranks are not, for instance, the common 'bucket of water over the door', 'floor made slippery' prank made to simply have fun. Such pranks are performed by other collectives, for instance 'Improv everywhere', a collective based in New York that organises 'no pants in the metro' day or reproduces a scene from 'The Matrix' movie in a public square. In the same sense that trolling a conversation is a means to provoke "a *reaction that reveals a truth* that the person reacting is either concealing, or may not even be aware of" (McDonald 2015, 973, author's emphasis), pranking is a

common way to reveal the absurdity or the unquestioned evil of a situation. To rig the election of Times magazine's person of the year, which forced the magazine to cancel the elections, revealed the sham and illusion of readership democracy. To elect a high school for the deaf, the winner of a 'Mountain Dew' music scholarship showed the shameless use of charity-like actions of corporations for public relationship and advertising purposes. The propagation of fake and damaging Apple announcements showed the blind technological fetishism of its consumers. The invasion of the virtual world Habbo Hotel with avatars depicting stereotypes of people of colour was a deliberate attempt to denounce its racist imagery.

## **Conclusion**

The different types of collective action presented—meme crafting, offensive speech, pranks—express common collective identity definitions that are modulated differently. First, all of these forms of collective action are the expression of the CICD of fun as a goal. Second, the CICD of offense is expressed in all of them except for purely ritualistic meme-crafting. Parrhesia is the system-breaching quality of the deviant parrhesiastic action, one that becomes a goal in itself in pranks. These collective actions, which are of a different nature, target different things, use different means, and are carried by different groups of people, are then linked through a web of meanings, CICDs that concern the shared experiences of the actions: fun, offense, and parrhesia.

The sudden addition of activist actions in the Anonymous repertoire in 2008, analysed in the next section, is better understood by recognising that pranks are already very similar to activist actions: both show solidarity, both are system-breaching at the social and socio-technical level, and both show conflicts against adversaries over specific resources. The resources at stake, however, are not fully recognised or assumed in pranks. The raid of Habbo hotel, for instance, might have originated in reaction to a racist situation, but Anonymous did not ask the company running Habbo to change its policies, nor generalised it as a fight against racism, nor reclaimed it as such. The situation changed in 2008 with Project Chanology when some Anons recognised that the fight against the Church of Scientology (CoS) was a fight against all of its practices of censorship and violations of human rights.

The next section shows how the attack against the CoS made Anonymous aware of its ability to create social change and the consequent construction of a hero archetype to represent itself, which can be compared with its earlier personalisation as a trickster figure.



## 7.2.2. Project Chanology and the rise of the goal of social change

The CoS is the typical nightmare of the parrhesiast, as the organisation obfuscates the truth in many ways: it keeps its beliefs secret from the public, requests large fees from its members to reveal a fake truth, lies about its crimes, makes evidence disappear, and silences witnesses (Reitman 2011). Project Chanology, the series of collective actions aiming to undermine the CoS, is at first a reaction against the attempted censorship of a video leaked on YouTube that showed an elated Tom Cruise praising the CoS. Project Chanology was therefore, first, a defence of freedom of information and of speech. Free speech is a priced political value to Anonymous because it is linked to the two self-defining deviances of Anonymous: the possibility to tell the truth and to experience the pleasure of offense. Free speech, expressed through the quasi-lack of moderation of posts in 4chan, permitted their emergence.

The creation of collective actions against the CoS was fuelled by a shared emotional reaction in which the violation of this value led to anger. Project Chanology was also, like any other prank, a means to have fun:

<Anon3> and then came the take down —the censorship [...]—and blatant lies and cover-up—and really pissed the hornet’s nest [...]—it didn’t start political—it started like we really don’t like them —just that—so lets...—uhm—prank them 'till oblivion

<Anon21> [at first] I literally gave no shit about the message—scientology had tried to censor my beloved internet—so I wanted to fuck with them badly—and milk the lulzcow—then a few years in I started caring

In a matter of weeks, however, voices began to suggest that Project Chanology should not limit itself to be a fun-inducing punitive expedition, but should also be a long lasting campaign aiming to bring down an organisation guilty not only of the violation of free speech, but also of many violations of human rights. This point of view came to prominence primarily because the CoS offered a target that permitted Anonymous to recognise an uncompromising and strong opponent, as well as to identify the social resources that were at stake. As mentioned above, the CoS is an easily identifiable villain (it clearly violates human rights) that can be hurt (and therefore collective action can have an effect), and that would take time to bring down. Previous pranks suffered from their ephemerality (they lasted only a few days or a few weeks), which did not permit the possible identification of stakes. This identification could be realised in Chanology, with the stakes being the public image of the CoS and the possibility to change this public image. Such identification completed all parameters for Project Chanology to become an activist type of collective action in Melucci’s typology. Coincidentally, this is the instant when Anonymous began to think of itself as an activist collective.

Activism as a CICD was encouraged by media publicisation and by a wave of newcomers interested in activism. The perceived success of the first collective actions, as well as their publicisation in the mass media and social media, reinforced the idea that Anonymous could make a change. Finally, the publicity caused by this mediatisation attracted participants outside of the Anonymous network, people who were more interested in social change—bringing down the cult—than producing lulz while doing it.

Newcomers brought with them the idea of Anonymous as having a main goal centred on social and political change. This is the case, for instance, of a group of people culturally different from channers that would come to be called ‘soccer mom Anons’. They are middle-aged women, often with an activist past, who reconnect with it through the internet.

<Anon16> the ones that spring to mind are a smallish bunch with kids at late teens [...]—the bulk seem to be hovering at my age 40ish plus—[...] and have empty nests, so perhaps more time to dedicate to causes [...]

<sylvian> motherhood is common but not eliminatory?

<Anon16> I would say in fact that the bulk of women anons of a certain age have done the motherhood thing fo sho [i.e. for sure]—I get the impression from the ones that i know that its a sense of seeking social justice that they had before but got sidetracked by life marriage and kids—once kids gone they return to it with a vengeance .

<sylvian> But why the CoS and not another cause for them?

<Anon16> I guess its easy to start with online keyboard activism—when a woman is seeking to redefine themselves—by default CoS fight was entry level easy activism and still remmbering how strange we all know someone who knows someone who got hurt by the COS—great jump in point for a woman who is lost—lol we a bunch of sad old biddies trying to recapture our youth and be more gross and thunderdome slavish than the next Anonlolol [Thunderdome is the ‘everything goes’ sub-forum of WhyWeProtest, what could be considered as its version of 4chan’s /b/]—I dont think any of this is a conscious progression more a journey that gets replicated for each of us almost like a common pathway to anon.

This quote underlines the fact that, as new comers influenced the collective identity construction process with their own ideas, eventually only those who could handle Anonymous’ offensive counterculture stayed: “those w[ho] were horrified were long gone before getting to know them” (Anon16). Fun and offense began to co-exist with the new activist collective identity definition that originated from the identification of the social stakes by part of the original community and from the importation of this idea by newcomers.

To become Anonymous is also to adopt and learn the vernacular and the cultural referents of the community. The arrival and stay of newcomers caused some uneasiness for the early participants because of socio-cultural differences. This anxiousness is expressed humorously in an Anon comics reproduced in figure 13.



Figure 13. "you can't protest, you don't know the memes". Comics circulating in Chanology platforms. Retrieved June 2015.

“You can’t protest, you don’t know the memes” implies two things. First, the lifeworld of Anonymous is closed to you if you do not understand the lingo and the multiplicity of cultural references it contains. Conversations are difficult to follow if you do not have this knowledge. Second, to use these references in conversations is one of the only ways to show that one is part of the collective (Beyer 2014, ch. 2). Anonymous’ vernacular and cultural referents are expressions of the collective identity definitions of fun and offense, as they have been constructed to fulfil these aims. To learn the vernacular and cultural referents is already to internalise these CICDs<sup>6</sup>.

To include newcomers in the collective, a process of acculturation took place so that the collective identity of Anonymous that already existed could be perpetuated. Below, is an excerpt from a Chanology forum thread that exemplifies this process. It concerns the meaning of the suffix ‘-fag’, which has already been mentioned earlier:

<A> So I'm new to all this, but I've spent the past few days researching Anonymous and Scientology pretty extensively; and I have to say, what's up with using the word fag all the time? I keep seeing the words scifag and orgfag, etc., all over Anonymous forums and other sites. How can we claim that April 12th's protests are about saving families from Co\$ while simultaneously using a slur that represents the kind of homophobia that also tears families apart. [...] Is there some explanation for using the word that I'm not privy to? Some sort of secret meaning maybe? A meme I missed? Enlighten me please.

<B> It's a meme and can be traced to the roots of Anonymous. Contrary to the mainstream usage, "fag" in the context of Anonymous (and Enturbulation [the first forum hosting Chanology], since many of our members are drawn from those ranks) is often used as an endearing term, similar to "friend" or "mate." In a way this meme is making a positive impact: we're co-opting the word and shifting the definition from offensive to friendly. Join the revolution! [...]

<A> I can get it as a meme, and I suppose, considering the obviously non-derogatory connotation it has here, there's little wrong with it. I just hope it isn't ever used when dealing with the general public. Many might not think it is quite as harmless as us. Anyways, thanks for clearing that up! (Why-WeProtest, April 2008)

To conclude, during Project Chanology, a new CICD, the goal of activism, emerged in Anonymous. First, with the identification of a long-lasting adversary and the recognition of stakes, namely the public image of the Church

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<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of the vernacular and cultural referents could be interpreted as a collective identity component in itself because it shows one’s membership or belonging to the group. However, while respondents often defined Anonymous as the collective in which offense, fun, and parrhesia could take place, it was never defined as the collective where some specific type of language could be used.

of Scientology, and second, with the arrival of newcomers that had the idea of social change in mind but were unaware of the offensive and fun-oriented collective identity of Anonymous. Newcomers were included through processes of self-selection (those who did not like it left) and acculturation, resulting in the continuation of previously existing CICDs that newcomers internalised. These events show how CICDs can emerge because of external conditions, such as the choice of a specific target and the attraction of newcomers who will import their own CICDs to the movement. The latter phenomenon stresses the ‘subjective’, individual, cognitive aspect of collective identity, as well as the intersubjective processes that harmonised strong differences of CICDs between the participants.

In the next section I explain how the CI definitions that are fun and social change relate to each other.

### 7.2.3. The rise of the hero archetype and the development of a multipolar action system

Antagonistic relationships between fun and activism, the goal-related collective identity definitions, arose from two fringe groups of Anonymous. One fringe group considers that the community should not have activism as a goal and that such an activism approach would limit the possibilities to have fun. The other group felt that the methods for having fun should be limited so that Anonymous could retain some respectability towards the public, which would eventually make activism more successful.

The concept of ‘hivemind’ is important to Anonymous. It refers to the aggregation of Anons that, because of anonymity, seems to think and act as one. This feeling gives rise to the conception of Anonymous as an abstract and autonomous entity (Appendix 8 shows graphical representations). From the beginning of Anonymous, Anons have discussed with one another to try to make sense of the movement and of this abstract entity. A reoccurring idea is that Anonymous personified is a trickster archetype (Anon17). The trickster plays pranks on people and can be cruel while doing so. In world mythology, prankster characters ridicule the powerful, point out hypocrisy and reveal truths (Jung 1969, Vogler 2007, 77).

When social justice emerged as a CICD related to the goal of actions, some Anons regarded it as a betrayal of the trickster nature of Anonymous. Two new denominatives were created: ‘lulzfag’ and ‘moralfag’. A lulzfag is an Anon who favours fun as the reason for collective action, whereas a moralfag prefers activism. Some members of the lulzfag tendency, which I call ‘radical lulzfags’, found it unacceptable that Anonymous could be considered as acting out of moral and political reasons. Anonymous was a trickster and as such should always be the “final boss of the internet” (knowyourmeme 2011), a being that does not concern itself with morality or justice and that can be cruel in order to achieve laughter. To engage in ac-

tions for the sake of morality, to play at being a hero, is to spoil the trickster spirit of Anonymous. Anonymous will also lose its integrity, its reputation, and its power: if Anonymous becomes 'soft' and develops feelings, it will no longer be thought of as an agent of chaos, to be feared, and it might even become an object of derision. Even worse is the scenario that if Anonymous develops moral reasoning, it will limit itself and become reluctant to perform fun but unscrupulous actions.

Moralfags prioritise activism over fun (more precisely, they prioritise the efficiency of activism). They developed a new persona for Anonymous that here is called a 'hero' archetype: a force of good, a champion of people's rights, a dispeller of oppressive forces, the 'hero' in its etymological sense of 'protector' and 'defender':

I consider myself a member of The Collective because all I see nowadays are social and political injustices cast upon those who aren't able to defend themselves, either due to fear-mongering, intimidation, or political silencing. I joined because I too have been a victim of fear of intimidation, through more outlets than I can imagine, and I plan to stand with the knowledgeable in the name of the defenseless. I heard about Anon through various public trolling, the Occupy movement, protests against Scientology, and shutting down various unconstitutional websites. This is exactly what the world needs, a defense propagated by constitutional rights, fairness and equality to all, and humanist-based mentalities. Big corps have doomed this planet, environmentally and politically, and we needn't let them continue (WhyWeProtest, June 2012)

The vision of Anonymous as a hero would also create collective actions of other types such as vigilantism (using system-breaching means to enforce the law) with the track of paedophiles for instance ('Operation PedoHunt' from 2012), or charity (consensus/system-maintaining/solidarity) by giving moral and material support to homeless people ('Operation Safe Winter' from 2014).

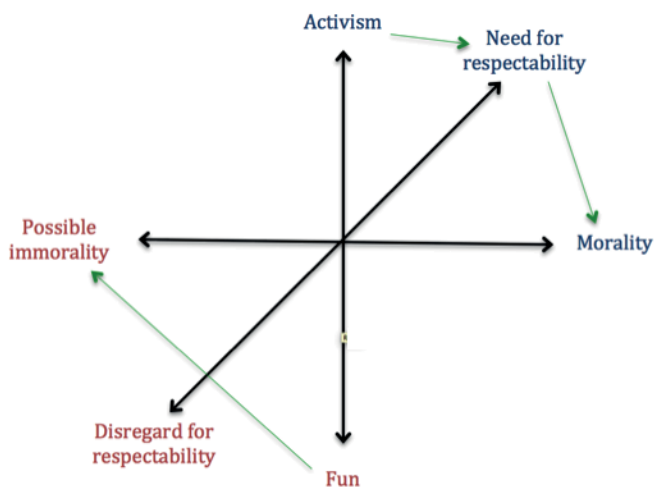
Moralfags have a problem with lulzfags, a problem related to the public image of Anonymous. As a movement that plays on media publicisation for its actions, its public image is important. To be considered as a force of good permits to build a us=good / target=evil narrative that will give Anonymous support from the public. At the same time, it vilifies the adversary, and as a consequence hurting it. Below is a forum excerpt that expresses this view:

Despite what anonymous started as, or what happened in the beginning, Anonymous has become and means alot more to not only itsmembers but also to the ppl [i.e. people] who now look at the collective as a means of resistance and standing up for the righteous, the ppl who cannot speak out or stand up, those who cannot or do not wish to get involved at a hacking level. There will and always has been Lulz with victories, but the recklessness of lulz must give way to morality for we have a responsibility to be an example, our own defined example of course nonetheless an example representing Good intent. Anonymous is the only means the people have to fight back

against evil dogs running this world. How can we stand up for ppl, then victimise them :-/ (AnonNews, May 2012)

The construction of two archetypes to define Anonymous expressed the formation of a multipolar action system in which all activist actions of Anonymous are to be situated within, creating a complex of resemblances and differences between collective actions.

Each archetype (trickster, hero) owns one pole of each orientation (goals, means, and relationship of the environment) of the action system. The CICDs contained in the action system (activism, fun, morality, etc.) are related to one another by the logics of action of the two archetypes presented above. Figure 14 illustrates the trickster/hero multipolar action system of Anonymous.



*Figure 14.* The trickster/hero multipolar action system of Anonymous. The vertical line concerns the goals, the horizontal line the means, and the diagonal the relationship to the environment. The blue CICDs are part of the hero archetype, the red ones part of the trickster archetype. The green arrows show dependencies between CICDs.

The goal of the participants who express the trickster identity of Anonymous focuses on the pleasure obtained from fun. To that effect, immoral actions, those that imply harassment and humiliation, are permitted. Public image is not considered an issue and hence is not acted upon. Anons who embody the hero identity of Anonymous act for social justice. Upholding a public image of probity helps to vilify adversaries and create a narrative that makes collective action more powerful. It implies that actions that could hurt the public image of Anonymous should be avoided. However, all collective actions do not have to follow a strict configuration (trickster or hero), and most find a

middle ground. The two goals of fun and social change are often both present in a given operation. One of the goals can be prioritised to different extents, tactics can be considered as more or less moral, and public image can be handled in different ways. Collective actions can be situated in middle positions in the action system.

I describe the rising antagonism between trickster and hero action system configurations in the next section.

#### 7.2.4. The rise of antagonism between trickster and hero configurations

The firm grounding of Chanology towards the ‘hero configuration’ of the action system (social change/ legal means/probity) took place five days after the launch of the movement when Chanologists decided to refrain from using illegal means. It was a tactical move, hoping that by gaining public trust through integrity (moral soundness) Chanology would hurt the CoS by intensifying the ‘good guys: us/bad guys: them’ narrative. The decision was also taken to avoid police arrests, which could threaten the very existence of the movement. The decision was taken by a strong majority of Chanologists who followed the advice of Mark Bunker, a long-term anti-Scientology activist. ‘Wise Beard Man’ as Anonymous calls him, is a journalist and documentary filmmaker who became a critic and contender of Scientology since 1999. Mark Bunker advised Anonymous to stay within the boundaries of the law. There had been discussions about putting bleach in the gas tanks of cars parked outside CoS buildings, or to cut the wires underneath them, or to go inside the buildings to flush rubber gloves down the toilets to block it (Bunker 2008, 02:00). For Bunker, these actions were “wrong ethically and legally” (ibid., 02:20), as well as harmful in the sense that the Anons could be arrested and prosecuted. Bunker also advised Chanologists to cease the DDoS attacks on the CoS websites, arguing that letting Scientology promote their ideas was a good thing if one demonstrates how absurd they are. He proposed instead to lobby for revoking the CoS tax-exempt status by contacting elected representatives, demonstrate, and publicise the violations and abuses committed by the CoS. After the acceptance of Mark Bunker’s advice, all illegal pranks became an anathema to Chanologists. Legal, “grey zone areas”, or misdemeanour actions were performed instead, such as black faxes, prank calls, misinformation campaigns targeting the CoS, and raising awareness campaigns on the internet with a humorous tone. Clearly, illegal methods such as DDoS and electronic penetration were prohibited.

If Anonymous, the self-described unruly ‘herd of cats’ (see section 7.3.1), followed Mark Bunker, it would be because part of it had already recognised the stakes of social change in Project Chanology. Moreover, it chose to consider these stakes to be more important than to have fun in whatever way. In



this sense, some participants understood Mark Bunker as a key figure in the evolution of the movement because he recognised the potential of Anonymous as a full-fledged activist collective, and encouraged it towards this direction:

<sylvian> How is it that some [Anons] from 4chan decide to go to more classic activist methods suddenly [after listening to Mark Bunker].

<Anon17> can be explained in different ways—if you want the romantic one<sup>7</sup> [...]—you can say the 4chan kids are misunderstood—they can detect fakery from miles away—wise beard man has an effect on them—because he was legit [i.e. legitimate]

<Anon16> hmmm beginning of the end of lulz?—very very beginning [...]

<Anon17> well idk [i.e. I don't know], maybe beginning of Anonbecoming more self conscious—of its actions/abilities—it came from the heart—and people from the internet who heard the call werent dumb—understood the points

<sylvian> which means 4chan and SA [i.e. the forum Something Awful] were not only populated by single minded lulzags

<Anon17> it was 4 chan, SA, digg, other chans (711, 420), gaming age forums, farkers [i.e. from fark.com] .etc— it was the internet coming together—mark bunker allowed them to show their other side when no one else supposed they had one because they judged based on first impression, which they didnt help their case first but still

<Anon20> channers = dumb kids is a meme [in this context 'meme' means cliché, misconception]

<Anon17> yeah—were all living in a basement—my mom—is upstairs

<Anon20> how many single mind lulzfags do you know— people are people—not [s]ingle path droids

As mentioned earlier, radical lulzfags and radical moralfags, champions respectively of the trickster and the hero archetype, soon expressed a dislike for each other. One can see this inclination of disapproval in cultural artefacts that personify the trickster and the hero personalities of Anonymous. Anonymous began to represent itself and its generic user as a suited man with a green face, sometimes with a question mark or the text 'no picture available' written on it (see figure 15). In reaction to the appearance of a hero persona, this green man will come to refer to the supposedly original trickster spirit of Anonymous afterwards.

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<sup>7</sup> Three of my respondents affirm that Anonymous was created by the secretive group *marblecake*, which carefully planned to make the birth of Anonymous seem like a self-organised, emergent phenomenon. Marblecake is described in section 7.3.2.



*Figure 15.* Early depiction of an Anon.



*Figure 16.* Guy Fawkes Mask (as sold by the Time Warner company), which became the symbol of the activist part of Anonymous.

The Guy Fawkes mask (see figure 16) became the personification of politically motivated Anonymous when it came to represent the masked hero from the movie ‘V for Vendetta’. In this movie, a masked trickster superhero rebels against a repressive, Orwellian-esque government. Eventually, the repressive regime is overthrown by the entire population that was galvanised by the hero. As such, the Guy Fawkes Mask expresses several collective identity definitions that have already been described or will be later: tricksterism, heroism, fight against oppression, self-effacement, and power of the mass.

Masks were first used by Chanologists. In the beginning, they did not symbolise the collective, but were adopted for a practical reason: the mask allowed individuals to disguise their identity, which helped to avoid potential harassment from the CoS. The choice of the Guy Fawkes mask, likewise, was not at first done for symbolic reasons but for a practical one: it and the batman mask were the only masks globally available at that time (Gregg Housh, IRC conversation). The mask found itself popular among demonstra-

tors, but it was not symbolising the Anonymous collective. At first, it was considered a reference to a 4chan meme called ‘epic fail guy’, which depicts a little character wearing a Guy Fawkes mask for no apparent reason and who cannot avoid but failing at whatever he does (see figure 17). The mask therefore came to represent the CoS at first. Wearing the mask was a way to mock the CoS.



*Figure 17.* Epic fail guy meme.

Guy Fawkes, after all, had failed its theocratic coup. Very soon, it began to be understood as representing not the CoS, but Anonymous itself, and this interpretation eventually became the prevailing one. This change, as well as the adoption of the Guy Fawkes mask as a universal symbol for all of Anonymous’ activist operations, shows a preference for a hero archetype that retains a tricksterist character, as the fictional hero ‘V’ is also a clever hero who makes fools of the prevailing powers.

Complains of lulzfags concerning the loss of Anonymous’ true nature are very common on every platforms of communication since the activist turn.

The second Chanology got mainstream Anonymous died. It became more about wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and bitching about liberal first world problems than the lulz or anything that the group stood for. And that whole ‘anyone is anonymous’ thing [see section 7.5.1] really backfired because now anytime some pimple-faced hippy finds an old facebook page of someone unpopular and reveals it the news acts like it’s from the secret Anonymous Cyperpunk-esque bunker. (WhyWeProtest, December 2008)

The dislike of the hero side by lulzfags is also apparent in several visuals published on 4chan, where the personifications of Anonymous as trickster and hero are depicted (see figure 18).



Figure 18. Trickster vs. hero. Pictures published on 4chan in 2010.

On the forums, Lulzfags began to show their discontent by expressing concern for the sudden care of their public image, (for instance, a thread beginning with this mocking quote: “WTF [i.e. what the fuck] is with this ‘O NOEZ, CAN’T DO THAT, ANONYMOUS WILL LOOK BAD ZOMFG [i.e. oh my fucking god]!!’”, while moralfags exhorted all Chanologists to change their attitude in that they saw the hero archetype as a next and higher step in Anonymous’ evolution.

Moral'fags' is what Anonymous is about.  
Lulz"fags" give us all a bad name, and you do too.  
Get the hell out of Anonymous.  
People like you make Anonymous suck.  
If Anonymous inspires that kind of fear, then it's an organization that bullies for no reason!!  
Had you been with us for a little longer, you'd have known that we used to inspire fear because we were a powerful system of good. (AnonNews, November 2013)

As a result, during Chanology, a wide spectrum of opinions emerged that concerned what Anonymous should strive for: on the one end, were the radical lulzfags who do not want Anonymous to have any normative claims; on the other end were the radical moralfags who felt Anonymous should champion social justice; and in the centre, which comprised the majority of Anons, were those who think that fun and activism are complementary, or at least can coexist.

In March 2008, a team of radical lulzfags attempted the sabotage of the moralfag movement and tried to damage Anonymous' public image by carrying out a spectacular and immoral act: they posted hundreds of flashing computed animations on the forum of the Epileptic Foundation of America, with the intent to induce seizures to persons suffering from epilepsy (Poulsen 2008). While the CoS used the event in an attempt to discredit Anonymous, Project Chanology was still able to continue activist actions. Still, the act triggered an emotional antagonisation between lulzfags and moralfags, and thus further dividing the two groups. In an attempt to keep everyone working together, debates on Anonymous' stance on fun and social justice were frequently held, with messages calling for unity, including the message listed below:

Are you the LuLz commander?  
The whole complex is [going to] fail without navy, the Army, the Marines and the Air Force [analogy with the different parts of Anonymous].  
We need the Lulz, we need the Moral fags, we all need each other, otherwise this body politic is without arms, legs or eyes to see.  
We are all the compone[n]t of a whole.  
A group conscience with a common goal.  
No need to b& [i.e. 'ban', referring to one faction wanting to kick out the other] when you have your own fleet.  
Fleet Lulz, Fleet Moral, fleet anonymous, fleet namefagged.  
The Gay Fleet, the Ex Fleet, the OG [i.e. Old guard, scientology fighters before Chanology] Fleet, the New Fleet.  
The Chanology Fleet, etc.  
United we stand, divided we fall, but that doesn't mean we can't have different areas of interest and aims to achieve the goal of which we all agree.  
Can't we all just get along and stay on target? :)

These attempts, however, failed to stabilise Chanology's position in the action system, primarily because some individuals became too polarised in their support of one archetype or the other. Radical lulzfags protested against performing demonstrations, because they considered them as too serious and incompatible with the trickster spirit. Some tried to sabotage them "by showing up with signs that had the dox of the people participating in the protest" (Anon14). As a result, Project Chanology eventually divided into factions. In what some respondents call a "schism" (anon14, 17), radical lulzfags quit Chanology to return to collective actions performed on the chans<sup>8</sup>.

These events show three things. First, collective identity definitions that are potentially contradictory can coexist and complement each other. In this case, the goals of fun and of activism are both sustained during Chanology and were both motivations to continue carrying out actions. The two of them are in contradiction in the sense that activism is better off with a good public image, but maintaining a good public image sacrifices the use of fun-inducing tactics. As is developed in the next section, it often happens that this tension is well handled by making concessions on the level of publicity and on the choice of methods.

Second, the archetypes are not just representations of poles of the action system but have their own logic: radical lulzfags refused the goal of activism not only because it limited the means to have fun but also because it was staining the reputation of Anonymous as an amoral, uncaring, and sometimes cruel trickster.

Third, even if the negotiation of this contradiction between fun and activism failed in Chanology, it did not mean the paralysis of the movement, something that usually happens in the case studies of Melucci (1989). The movement kept alive because those who did not accept the positioning of Chanology in the action system simply left, and many of them came back to the chans to perform other pranks. It is an example of a wider logic in Anonymous that involves the splitting and forking between collective actions. If some Anons do not like the action system positioning of an operation and fail to change it through deliberation and other means, they can leave and create their own operation, which avoids paralysing the first operation through disagreements. To paraphrase, participation in a collective action within Anonymous is subjected to a logic of 'voice', 'exit' and 'fork': Anons select the operations they wish to participate in accordance with the applica-

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<sup>8</sup> Some channers later would come to perform reactionary types of collective action with a racist and sexist agenda. This side of Anonymous that does not sign its deeds and does not ask for recognition is one of the most elusive parts of the collective, and its relationship with the rest of the submerged network is uncertain. Because of the lack of time and difficulties to carry out ethnographic research on this aspect of Anonymous, it is not studied in this work.

tion by the operation of the CICDs the Anons carry. If they find that practices in the operation are not compatible with their CICDs anymore, they can either try to change it, notably by discursive action (complaining, asking people to change their behaviour), or they can leave the operation. They can also decide to create a new operation with a similar action system but that is supposed to express better their CICDs. In the next section, some examples are given of how some Anonymous collective actions can successfully negotiate contradictions within the action system and take a middle position between trickster and hero.

### 7.2.5. Stabilising contradictions

With the relocation of radical lulzfags to other parts of Anonymous' submerged networks (chans mostly), Project Chanology stabilised its position in the action system towards a hero configuration, giving a coherent logic to the movement and enabling sustained and numerous actions for a year (it is still ongoing today though at a slower pace). However, most Anons in the activist parts of the collective still consider Anonymous to be a trickster-hero archetype. Activism is seldom the only goal because 'the lulz' are present as well. In collective actions that have activism and fun as goals, the tension between the need to keep a good public image and the pleasure that comes from performing immoral actions needs to be carefully managed. It is done through discussions in which participants offer their views on projects and whether they support or disagree with their enactments in terms of the effects on public image. Motivation to participate is also strongly influenced by the expectancy of how much fun it will produce. Different decisions are possible depending on the concerns of public image and on how much the prohibition of immoral forms of action costs in terms of fun. Different participants bring different sensitivities and different possibilities of choice.

Participants have different priorities concerning fun and activism. A successful operation needs to fulfil both needs to keep as many participants as possible active. A few respondents told me that having both lulzfags and moralfags acting together was beneficial to project Chanology as a whole:

<sylvian> what do you think was the effect of the tension lulzfag/moralfag on the efficacy of Chanology?

<Anon16> It always existed the tension as you say—I think give or take each participant has a touch of both moralfag and lulzfag in them. It helps bring about more robust dialog maybe, but through robust debate comes a better array of ideas to[o]

[...]

<sylvian> so discussions make people work together and come up with goo[d] ideas even if they are different on their lulzfag/moralfag scale

<Anon16> yeah the hard core will always get butthurt [i.e. annoyed, resentful] and run away hurling foul abuse—but most can accept that wisdom comes from both camps  
<sylvian> what do you think was the effect of the tension lulzfag/moralfag on the efficacy of Chanology?  
<Anon23> I think the two complemented each other really well actually—the lulzers got us attention and the moral fags explained the problem

There are different possibilities of positioning in the Anonymous action system. An example of a hoax called ‘fappy the anti-masturbation dolphin’ is presented. In May 2013, well-known news websites and the Twitter sphere began to share a Twitter message from (a fake) Michael Moore, reading that the filmmaker was preparing a documentary on the anti-masturbation movement and its mascot, fappy the dolphin (Dunn 2013) (‘to fap’ means to masturbate in chans’ vernacular). A few days after the Twitter message, a news article from an unknown website (then shared by more reliable sources) announced that the man impersonating fappy the dolphin had been arrested for public masturbation. It soon was revealed that this series of news events had been faked and that the media had been manipulated. The hoax was making fun of the anti-masturbation movement in America, but also of the alleged sponsors of fappy, namely the biotech company Monsanto and the Westboro Baptist Church. (Fappy is advertising Monsanto in figure 19).



Figure 19. Fappy the dolphin and its sponsor Monsanto

The action was mainly an act of tricksterism: it did not claim any ambition for social change and seemed to have been mainly done for the lulz, having made a fool of the media and abusing their credulity. Yet, it was naming and undermining organisations that have often been targeted by the activist branch of Anonymous. This hoax is positioned on the trickster side of the action system, but keep some hero characteristics. Tensions between activism and fun were non-existent because the means used (manipulation of the media) did not tarnish Anonymous’ reputation.

Finally, stabilising the position of an operation in the action system is not a fixed process, but rather it has to endure glitches and needs constant inter-



actions to keep people agreeing and participating. One example of glitch is an action within Project Chanology carried out by an Anon that would come to be named ‘agent pubeit’. In January 2009 (a year after the beginning of Chanology), an Anon filmed another Anon running into a New York branch of the CoS centre covered in Vaseline, pubic hair, and toenail clippings. While in the centre, the individual rubbed himself against walls and furniture.

The morality of the action and its impact on public image are difficult to establish. Public opinion might not consider it as an unredeemable act of evil and would thus not likely frown upon Anonymous because of it. However (and taking aside questions of good taste that are never matters of discussion in Anonymous), rubbing oneself on privately owned furniture covered in pubic hair without consent of the owner is illegal, and not surprisingly, the perpetrator was arrested, found guilty, and sentenced. It was a violation of the collective decision that prohibited illegal actions. Such deviation shows that incoherence exist and that it is facilitated by the flat organisation Anonymous uses, i.e. an organisation that contains no chain of command and where cells are autonomous (see section 7.3.1). Individuals cannot be prevented from occasionally stepping out of line.

The potential tension between fun and activism is always present and lulzfags/moralfags dissensions can reignite at any time. Encyclopedia Dramatica of lulzfag leaning, comments in the page dedicated to the operation: “THIS is what Chanology should have been. Tastes great, less moralfaggotry” (Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015a). The article also quotes outraged reactions from other Chanologists:

I feel like an asshole because I thought anons were the answer to bringing down this pig cult. I seriously hope all anons don't condone this shit. What the fuck is wrong with that guy? How is that gonna bring down the cult? is he going to start showing up at the protests next? Will he become the new Anonmascot? I'm sorry but I'm fucking pissed off. I know we have fun at the pickets but this is just not the kind of group I signed up for. Bad deal. The meaning of anon's mission got lost. (ibid.)

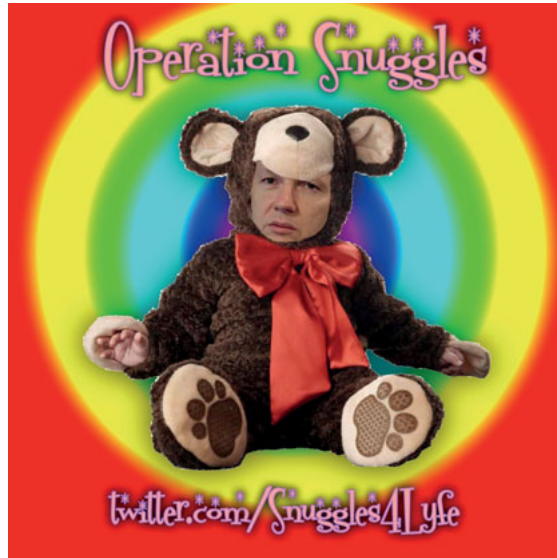
In the end Agent pubeit was an isolated case and did not hurt Chanology’s public image. However, as shown in the next section, the multitude of cases that act outside of the defined action system position can lead to dissent.

### 7.2.6. Second schism: autonomisation of Ubiquitous and its path towards heroism

After the autonomisation of Chanology from the rest of the Anonymous submerged network, with its particular positioning in the action system, the tensions between trickster and hero continued to be a major cause for division. The most visible division was the expulsion from the Chanologist

communication platforms of a new influx of participants because of specific concerns concerning the legality of methods. In September 2010, different groups and individuals within Anonymous (mainly from 4chan) united and launched ‘Operation Payback’ to protest against the Motion Picture Association of America, which hired a private company to DDoS a file sharing website. Operation Payback originally installed itself in the platforms of communication that were mainly used by Chanologists, notably its IRC server AnonNet. However, Operation Payback’s main tactic was the launch of DDoS attacks. This action was quickly reacted upon by the Chanologist community that had kept to its principle and would not accept the management of illegal practices on their platforms. Chanologists would not risk having their image of rightful activist tarnished, nor would they risk having their platforms sized by the police and their operators arrested. Asked to leave, the participants of Operation Payback left the AnonNet for other IRC servers before eventually setting up their own server that they would call ‘AnonOps’. However, AnonNet was and is still an open server, and it suffered from its reputation of being the central hub for Anonymous activist actions. As such, it attracted newcomers unaware of the ban on illegal methods. The situation became critical to Chanologists when groups involved in Operation Payback launched ‘Operation Avenge Assange’ in December 2010 to protest the blocking of funds of WikiLeaks by financial institutions. This operation attracted a large number of newcomers from outside of the Anonymous submerged network, who mistakenly directed themselves as a group towards AnonNet. Because this operation also included DDoS attacks, Chanologists had to create a spoof operation called ‘Operation Snuggles’ that was dedicated to oust these newcomers from the AnonNet IRC server. Operation Snuggles consisted among other things in making fun of Assange (see figure 20) in AnonNet IRC channels to encourage those interested in DDoS to leave:

```
<Anon23>operation snuggles was to stop kids ddos'ing—1) we didn't want
that shit on the network—2) we didn't want 13 yo's arrested for being
dumb—the loic'ers were cannon fodder [LOIC is a software used to perform
DDoS attacks]—but mainly, we did it to protect AnonNet, and for the lulz
<sylvian> eventually they were indeed cannon fodder
<AnonP> with every ddos
<Anon23> They were always cannon fodder
<AnonP> the loic kids are almost always canonfodder [...]
<sylvian> You didn't want DDoS because it was dangerous to them and the
server then?
<Anon23> sylvian, yeah, hosting loic means raids on ircops [i.e. IRC opera-
tors]
```



*Figure 20.* Poster for ‘Operation Snuggles’. The superimposed face is that of Julian Assange.

Eventually, Chanologists tried and succeeded in maintaining their collective identity definition of legal means against the massive arrival of individuals with DDoS in mind.

From their newly created IRC platform AnonOps, the Ubiquitous movement was first an activist movement that aimed for a stronger focus on the lulz, which in the mind of some had been stifled by the careful choice of legal and publicly acceptable means, and then the acceptance of illegal methods. In a matter of months, though, it evolved in a similar manner to that described for Chanology: Operation Payback was created from shared emotional reactions against what was interpreted as a violation of the value of freedom of information, and used DDoS just as Chanology did in its first days. The Ubiquitous collective autonomised itself from the chans and Chanology by stabilising a particular action system configuration and by setting up dedicated platforms of communication. Then, in a matter of months, however, the positioning of Ubiquitous’ action system leaned more towards the hero side. For the sake of activism, Ubiquitous began to care about its public image. Some Anons recognised that electronic direct actions were not well perceived by the public, especially because such use had led much of the mass media to portray Anonymous as a band of dangerous mischief-makers who were threatening the security of the internet (Klein 2015). Some Anons in the hacker circles of Ubiquitous were advised not to perform hacks that could be considered as too damaging to Anonymous’ public image. This situation led to the creation of ‘splinter cells’, autonomous groups related to Anonymous through bonds of friendship and affection towards the collective, and the sharing of common CICDs, but acting with their own signature

rather than using the name of Anonymous. ‘Lulzsec’ is the most famous splinter cell. This splinter group conducted its first coup d’éclat in May 2011 (six months after Operation Avenge Assange) by hacking the ‘Fox’ Website (an American commercial broadcast television network).

<Anon69> [We] wanted to just do funny shit and hax [i.e. hack] anyone without needing permission from the collective

<sylvian> do you mean Anonymous was not that fun at the time lulzsec was formed?

<Anon69> Yes—Anonymous = rules—Lulzsec = freedom [...]—A lot of ls [i.e. Lulzsec] members where most of the original anons—Who thought that the movement had gone too commercial...

<sylvian> commercial?

<Anon69> Umm commercial = mainstream—If u hacked something and the news said Anonymous hacks blah blah blah and then they give it a negative spin—So anons had to kinda get permission to hax after a while [...] <sup>9</sup>

These events demonstrated two things. First, such Anonymous groups as Chanologists, which had constructed a stable action system configuration, can react against newcomers that wish to apply another configuration and oust them from their platforms. A level of compatibility of CICDs at the interpersonal level is required to enable cooperation. Second, the system of splitting and forking of Anonymous has limits. As mentioned earlier, the forking logic means that if a group of Anons is not happy with the CICDs expressed in an operation, it can decide (or can be forcefully nudged) to create its own parallel operation, preventing paralysis. Participants in LulzSec and other splinter cells decided that the action system configuration they wanted to create—more lulz, less activism—could no longer be positioned within the limits of the action system where the sign “Anonymous” can be used. Members of LulzSec therefore created another name and logo, and claimed that they might well be affiliated with Anonymous, but that they were not acting in the name of Anonymous. The decision reinforced a general shift in 2011 in the whole submerged network, a majority of participants having decided that the use of the sign ‘Anonymous’ could not be used for actions that would be too tricksterish. Pranksters from the chans had, in fact, already limited of the use of the sign about the same period, in order to demarcate themselves from Anonymous activist operations.

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<sup>9</sup> The respondent accepted that I quote this conversation at on the condition that I correct his/her grammar mistakes and change his/her pseudonym into “Anon69”.

### 7.2.7. Conclusion

This section shows how the collective actions of Anonymous are interrelated and differentiated through the expression of collective identity definitions that pertain to the goals, means, and relationship with the environment of the action. First, collective actions made by channers have in common the search for fun. They can be ritualistic (meme-crafting), deviant (offensive and parrhesiastic speech), or quasi-activist (collective pranks). Some meme-crafting, offending speech, and pranks also share the CICD of offense. Parrhesiastic speech and pranks share as well the CICD of parrhesia, although it is a system-breaching component for parrhesiastic speech, and a goal in itself for pranks.

The emergence of activist actions (actions directed towards social change) in Anonymous is neither random nor sudden. Activist actions share with pranks many of the same characteristics: they are solidary actions, they are system-breaching on the social and technical level, they define targets, and they were often conflictual over symbolic resources, undermining an organisation's integrity or revealing a truth. Most of the time pranks were not framed or understood as such, and attaining the lulz was the most important or only reason for action. The prank called Project Chanology became an activist action when Anons recognised the stakes of social change and assumed Chanology as an activist action. Recognition of the stakes came from the choosing of a target that would strengthen the conflictual side of the collective action campaign called Chanology. Because of its very nature, the CoS summoned enough hate onto itself so that the declared goal of Chanology became its destruction through a long-term campaign. Chanologists accepted their goal of social change when they recognized the stakes at hand (the situation of the CoS and its reputation) and the possibility that they could change them.

Most activist actions share with other collective actions of Anonymous the CICDs of fun, offense, and parrhesia. The introduction of the self-definition of Anonymous as an activist entity, an agent with social change as a goal, created new possibilities of collective action for Anonymous. It also created new issues to think about and new tensions to handle. For many Anons who were trying to make sense of the movement, Anonymous was akin to a trickster figure: a character that was playing tricks on people for its own enjoyment, sometimes cruel, frequently revealing the truth about people and situations. The insistence of some Chanologists concerning the goal of social change revealed the construction of another view of Anonymous within its ranks, namely, that of a hero archetype, defender of people and slayer of oppressors. These two personifications are the expression of different logics of action: the trickster wants fun, does not care about its public image, and does not hesitate to perform immoral acts as long as it results in pleasure. The hero, by contrast, wants social justice. To this aim, it needs to be

considered a morally respectable figure and therefore refrain from immoral acts. These two contrasting logics created a multipolar action system in which all Anonymous collective actions would be positioned on accordingly.

Champions of both archetypes, called lulzfags and moralfags, would oppose one another to gain power over the other, but most of the time they found ways to work together. Participants do not have to choose between one pole or the other: they can fulfil both goals, find tactics that can be fun without being damaging to the movements in terms of public image, and agree on how important it is to show a ‘good face’ to the outside world. Compromises are not always possible, though, and for a collective action to keep a stable positioning in the action and avoid paralysis, participants need to discuss, renegotiate, and harmonise the opinions and acts of all its participants. In some instances, the participants may even have to expel those who act in ways that are strongly incompatible.

What does it say about the collective identity of Anonymous? First, that CICDs are not only the result of intersubjective construction, but that they can also be imported from the outside, might it be the idea of an influent individual, or through newcomers who already carry definitions of the movement prior to them joining. Second, that these CICDs are emergent properties of the movement because they are characteristics of the collective actions. Third, collective identity answers here to a ‘plural unity’ concept, where collective actions can choose different CICDs, but within one system of action: each Anonymous operation can have a different positioning within parameters that have been funded since the construction of the two archetypes. To know (and understand) this explains in part the centrifugal logic of Anonymous, the performance of heterogeneous actions under one name: collective actions choose different logics of actions, but the logics are predefined and bounded by limitations. Participants of different collective actions recognise each other as Anonymous through the play of resemblances and differences of the positioning of their action system and the CICDs they have in common. Next section analyses the CICDs that pertain to the organisation of the collective actions performed by Anonymous.

### 7.3. Organisation and decision-making process

This section discusses the CICDs related to the types of organisation of Anonymous and to its decision making-processes (DMPs). First are presented the collective identity definitions and their expressions, then the phenomena that contravene to their expressions, and finally the reactions to the differences between principles and practices.

### 7.3.1. Norms and expressions of horizontality and democracy

Anonymous respondents spontaneously refer to the organisation of the collective and its DMPs to define it. In public releases that define Anonymous, the principles of horizontality and democracy are some of the first characteristics of Anonymous to be presented:

We have no leaders or spokespersons.—One head lacks the power of many.—One head is corruptable.—One head is removeable.—Everyone who claims to speak for all Anonymous is a fraud. (WhyWeProtest, October 2010)

We are freedom, we are democracy in its purest form.—If one has an idea and finds many that feel the same, action is born.—If not, the initiative passes by without notice. (ibid.)

Anonymous has no leaders, and no central voice. There is no rank or structure in Anonymous. There is no promotion in Anonymous. There is no initiation hazing or recruitment of Anonymous. (transcript from a YouTube video, <https://goo.gl/xRD46y> )

This section presents the CICDs of horizontality and participatory democracy and their practical expression.

#### **Horizontality**

As defined in section 5.3.2, horizontal organisation refers to the lack of hierarchy, chain of command and specialisation of roles. The term ‘flock of birds’ is often summoned by Anons to describe the movement, in interviews, forums and IRC discussions. This CICD concerns the emergent property of the collective; it refers to the dynamic form of Anonymous as a complex system in which the direction and dynamics of the collective depend on the position of all individuals and their relations to one another, sometimes looking like the whole is following an individual or a group, sometimes appearing as a chaotic mass, sometimes as a concerted movement, and always undergoing sudden changes. Individuals are subjected at one point in time to gregarious behaviour, all following in the same direction with no apparent leadership, and then they can suddenly disperse and go their own way:

<Anon8> some birds fly in a diff[erent] direction, sometimes parallel to the original flock, other times in a totally diff direction and everyone else chooses who to follow [...] it was random [...] i could fly 180 degrees away from most of the other groups and still call myself part of the anon flock

The oxymoronic expression ‘herd of cats’, often used as well, refers to shared attributes of Anons. It denotes the difficulty of managing Anonymous participants and leading them onto one direction. Anons, like cats, are too

independent to answer to anyone's orders, therefore impossible to herd. This wish for autonomy is expressed in different types of organisation within Anonymous. Anonymous organisations can be categorised by the number of participants involved: small-, middle-, and large-scale organisations. On the small-scale level are the affinity groups (groups formed around a common goal) that host up to a dozen participants. Ideally, hierarchy does not exist, roles are not fixed, and decisions are consensual. Long-lasting affinity groups are often strengthened by emotional attachments. Horizontality is helped by the fluid individual attachments to groups that discourage allocation of fixed roles and the creation of a chain of command. Groups can be exclusive (members do not accept other participants), but more often they are open and combine a stable core to which fleeting participants are included for a limited time.

On the meso-scale exists an original organisation that I call 'cloud action' and that involves between a handful of individuals and a hundred. Affinity groups sometimes take this configuration. The term 'cloud action' refers to the concept of cloud protesting proposed by Milan (2013b), in which a "set of ingredients enabling mobilization coexist—namely, identities, narratives, meanings, and know-how" (200). In cloud action, information is pooled and worked on by different people that often have no communication whatsoever with one another. Individual spontaneity is encouraged:

<Anon11> everyone is putting together important information, and taking information down about it [...]—associating things—like a think tank—and you [know] which people are valuable based on the data they provide—some provide sensitive facts—on a frequent basis—like a military briefing—social engineering—then, you have the others, who are breaking into systems or cracking something private—but, yeah, you start to get a tornado when a few guys work together—you can feel the other persons heart beat when you are in battle.—if someone dumps [i.e. releases the data of] an entire email box—someone has to look for the good stuff. [...]

<sylvian> and did you take decisions together?

<Anon11> [...] not really, no —i might set a mark—and they might decline for something else—[...] might keep it in mind for later, but not usually—most of the time, they know what they want [the other individuals in the operation]—its rare to catch any of them looking for targets [i.e. knowing precisely what they are going for]—you just feed them information as they go—its like a drug

One of the most common tactics that takes advantage of cloud action configuration consists in looking for vulnerabilities in servers to deface websites or leak data. It has also been used during Operation Paris in 2015 to close Twitter accounts related to the Islamist State, where information on Twitter account targets were pooled.

Large-scale organisations include between dozens to potentially thousands of people (the typical number would be on the scale of a few hundred).



I call them ‘mass actions’. They are also referred internally as ‘swarms’ or ‘raids’ and mostly take the form of invasion of electronic platforms of communication and of virtual worlds, or of DDoS attacks. As referred to earlier, Anonymous started mass actions about 2006, preparing them on 4chan, other image boards of the submerged network and dedicated IRC channels. The initiative is created by one or a small group of Anons who attempt to bring a critical number of participants to the collective action. Threads are created on the image board and their popularity and success are assessed under the same selection process of cultural artefacts: threads stay longer if they receive many answers and are reposted if users find them interesting. Organisation and direct interactions are minimal: guidelines on how to act during the operation are published in the image board threads, and users can choose or decide not to join. One example is the raid of the virtual world Habbo Hotel in 2006. To participate, the user simply had to register and to create a character with a same predefined look and then login to the virtual world.

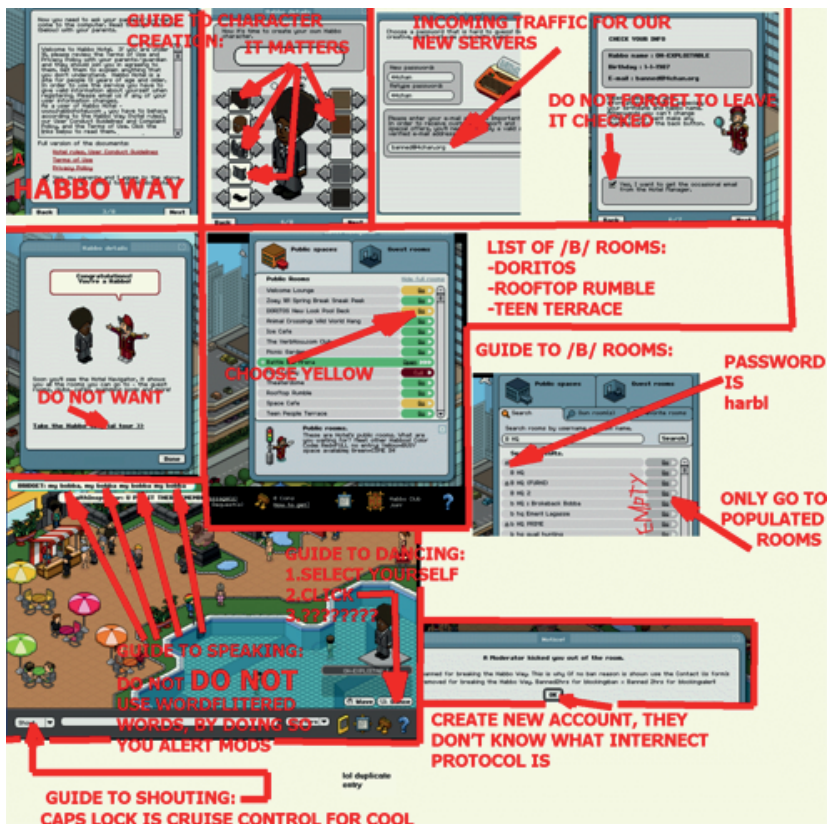


Figure 21. Guidelines posted on 4chan during the 2006 Habbo raid: how to create an avatar and which behaviour to adopt.

Distributed denial of service attacks bears the same logic: they are reminiscent of raids because the user needs to perform a simple action (in the present case, to run a software that automatically does the job) and the fact that the success of the action relies on the number of participants. Below, is a respondent's description of the organisation during DDoS attacks.

<Anon8> to be honest—it wasn't [organised]—anonymous is decentralized—and therefore disorganized—operates by network—irc network—people will come onto networks and some older more experienced Anon will guide people to target stuff or someone will come along and start an op[eration] himself—they give out the ip to attack and people just use a web tool or download the ion cannon program to ddos—but yes it was messy it was just hey somethings wrong with x company lets do something—and then ppl [i.e. people] all scrambled together to do something—[...] someone just says something and people jump on it—this is a bit puzzling—but all [projects/planned attacks] within their own networks [...] not much communication between the fragmented cells—there is nothing to dictate that—there is no real chain of command— its just oldfag newfag [veterans / newcomers]—of thing—a few people would go set out to do something—others could follow or chose not to—its like a bird flock

Acting in a mass action gives an elating, oceanic feeling, the pleasure to be part of a larger project, knowing that one's peers contribute on the same scale as yours for a grander scheme: “i stay anonymous—im a whole—a collective—i move with the tide...—just a drop” (Anon4). This is an emotion that can be identified in other electronic collaborative movements such as Wikipedia, where the feeling attached to the construction of the encyclopaedia is called “wikilove” (Firer-Blaess and Fuchs 2012), the pleasure to collaborate with others online and to feel part of a collective.

These types of organisation express the collective identity definitions of Anonymous as a horizontal structure and of Anons as autonomous beings. Finally, horizontal structures are not just here to fulfil the definition of individual autonomy. Horizontality is also a *normative* definition of collective identity in that it defines how the good, virtuous community should be structured. I return to this idea in section 7.4.2 on the use of anonymity. The next section describes the CICD of participatory democracy.

### **Participatory democracy**

‘Anonymous has no leader’ is a self-defining catchphrase often used in the submerged network of Anonymous, for instance on the welcome page of the AnonOps IRC server. It refers to the will for participatory democracy. Some respondents were eager to underline it to me during interviews, for instance Anon4 who showed directly to me the consensual decision that had been taken in his affinity group concerning his/her participation in my research, by copying and pasting the conversation s/he just had with his/her team:

<Anon4> [here citing me, anonymising my name] “<\_\_\_\_\_> Oh and I'm launching interviews now; would you care to answer some questions, about you and Anonymus?”

<Anon4> [He is] an old friend from long ago—Is anyone averse to me doing this?

<peer1> ofc [i.e. of course] not

<peer2> go for it

<Anon4> Cool just wanted to be sure I had consensus

Types of DMPs are diverse in the submerged network but they all try to express the CICD of participatory democracy. DMPs can be based on vote, consensus, or on unspoken agreements that some Anons refer as ‘organic’ decision-making:

<Anon14> When you were doing op[eration]s, how did people manage to take decisions with each other?

<Anon14> usually the most popular ideas gained—it was all very organic [...]—there was no 'official' voting—when an idea got traction, you just knew [...]—it happened on its own—I don't know how else to put it lol

Consensus, vote or ‘organic’ outcome can originate from a model of DMP that has been experimented in all three branches of Anonymous and that relies on anonymity. Here, its implementation within Project Chanology is presented. In the beginning of Chanology, the movement distributed itself into geographical and thematic cells, and kept a centre for general brainstorming and conjoint actions in the form of a forum called ‘enturbation’ (succeeded by ‘WhyWeProtest’ a few months later after internal feuds). With a central place for deliberation, the partial continuation of anonymity and the need for more complex actions than swarm attacks when fighting such a powerful organisation as the CoS, Chanologists tried to put into place an original DMP based on the ‘hivemind’ that was referred to on p. 125.

The hivemind refers to the CICD of Anonymous as the mass of unidentified Anons that seems to have a thinking of its own, to create artefacts and take decisions by itself. It is often equated to a brain in which neurons are be individuals:

In [the] Hivemind, every person is a node—a processor like the neurons in your brain. Every time you encounter an idea on the internet [...] you are receiving 'input.' Any ideas you pass on are your 'output.' Your inputs are the media you consume, and the outputs are the people that hear what you have to say. In your brain, the inputs to a neuron may conflict; similarly, in the Hivemind you will encounter conflicting information and conclusions. It's your job to sift through all the arguments and evidence and decide what signal you're going to pass along to the next “node”, who must weigh all their inputs, including what they get from you, and decide what to pass along and what to dismiss as 'noise.' (WhyWeProtest, December 2010)

I call ‘hivemind-agera’ the hivemind used for decision-making in Chanology (agera in the sense of a popular political assembly). The principle of the hivemind-agera is that the best ideas can be selected during brainstorming if arguments can stand by themselves without being backed by their authorship. Authorship distorts the process of selection of good ideas because people have different levels of charisma and hence different weights in terms of legitimacy are given to their arguments. By being anonymous and obfuscating authorship, participants allow themselves to participate in rational discussions from which the inner quality of a proposed idea is the only parameter for their selection: “the idea was that a good idea could stand on its own merit” (Anon14). In shorter terms, Chanologists try to enable a Habermasian rational discourse (Habermas 1984) unburdened by distortions of power caused by differences of charisma between participants. Free from their authorships, ideas can compete with one another on a fair and equitable basis, where the best ideas are selected.

The next section presents how the application of the CICDs of horizontality and participatory democracy is limited by several phenomena.

### 7.3.2. Limits to horizontality and democracy

Limitations to the expression of the definitions of horizontality and democracy are due to three phenomena: the lack of a DMP due to a “dictatorship of action” (Milan 2013a, 94), the “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman 1972), and the development of charismatic authority.

**‘Stand-alone complex’: Absence of decision-making process and the dictatorship of action.**



*Figure 22.* Stickers in support of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Mash up between the Anonymous motto (‘We are Anonymous. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.’) and the logo of the Laughing Man, a fictional hacktivist who unwillingly triggers a stand-alone complex in the anime series ‘Ghost in the Shell’.

Some collective actions in Anonymous require very little or no DMPs between participants, which is the case for some swarms and cloud actions. Participants will decide to follow the simple guidelines that have been posted as figure 21 shows, or to mimic Anons that are already participating in the action.

<Anon8>but yes it was messy it was just hey somethings wrong with x company lets do something—and then p[eo]pl[e] all scrambled together to do something [...]  
<sylvian> so when you said that the ddos werent organised, it was the ircops [i.e. IRC operators] setting targets and people were following?  
<Anon8> sometimes yes—but sometimes people just did it themselves—like i said, someone just says something and people jump on it

With the absence of communication and communal decision, the DMP is not consensual, representative, or bureaucratic; it is absent. This absence is usually the result of the need to quickly react to events, when the democratic DMP is not fast enough, so that Anons either vote or agree with little or no time for discussions, or follow those that are implicated the most in the action. Milan (2013a) calls this the “dictatorship of action” (94).

A few Anons and outside commentators have romanticised the phenomenon by relating it to a ‘stand-alone complex’, a science fiction concept from the anime series ‘Ghost in the Shell’ aired in 2002, which describes a phenomenon where unrelated individuals act in a similar manner, creating the

illusion of a collective action. The phenomenon begins with the release of a certain information or event from which a number of individuals answer with the same behaviour. Users like to draw this parallel to underline another CICD presented in section 7.5.1, which is that Anonymous should be considered as an ‘idea’, an information that triggers collective action with little need for coordination.

This type of non-organisation does not reflect the collective identity definition of participatory democracy; however, it does fulfil the one concerning individual autonomy.

### **Tree houses and the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’**

The concept of hivemind-agora referred to earlier was difficult to fully implement in Chanology because of a situation where pseudonymity was beginning to be more practiced than anonymity in electronic platforms of communication (definitions section 5.3.2). With pseudonymity, individual needs for social recognition could be expressed: “in chanology bragging was just done under your handle, which took on a life of its own—encyclopedia dramatica was there to document handles exploits—there was so much interpersonal drama and competition for social status” (Anon23). Eventually, pseudonymity and the behaviour it generated “disturb[ed] the hivemind” (AnonP). Because of the possibility of recognition (as in recognising someone in the street) offered by pseudonymity, a relative ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (Freeman 1972), the development of informal structures of authority through the formation of influential cliques appeared in Chanology alongside the hivemind-agora.

Cliques in Chanology are called ‘tree houses’: they are the series of private and hidden groups of a few who have the will to influence the DMP of the hivemind through concealed lobbying, or as one of the respondents describes it, “private irc channels where a few people decide for the next actions on behalf of others” (Anon18) (the term is sometimes used for any private group in general). Small groups of friends or working groups are common and unproblematic. What distinguishes a tree house from them is the lack of transparency when it goes to influencing the hivemind-agora. The most infamous tree house of Chanology is the group ‘marblecake’, which was revealed as such in May 2008. Marblecake was a group that devised operations and created media content for and on behalf of Anonymous. Some discussions between marblecake members were leaked, such as the one cited below.

<A>so anyways—[Describing Chanology] a lot of pylons, sheep, whatever you want to call them.—nothing bad with being that—sometimes its lack of available time, sometimes it’s just them not being the type to do anything other than show up—so we exist. [...]

<B> this is the real time think tank—or the "work for nothing behind the scenes ALL GLORY TO ANONYMOUS" room [...]— wherez nothing ever

leaves, and no one knows it exist.. etc., etc.—its the whip room. wherez the HEAVY workers stay—[...]  
<C> We do some stuff. Mostly pr [i.e. public relations] stuff. Shit gets done. Only finished products leave this room [...]  
<B> \_\_\_\_\_ was here the other day and showed us his proposal for Spy vs Sci : License to Lulz [a Chanology operation]—we rubber stamped it cuz it was funny—and thats the "magic" behind Anon - people wonder where the hell everything comes from, its mostly herez

I develop on the reactions to the outing of marblecake in section 7.3.3.

### **The development of charismatic authority**

*anonymous might not have leaders, but networks have administrators*

*Anon2*

The rise of pseudonimity in Chanology and Ubiquitous permitted the emergence of individual inequalities in the possibilities to influence groups because of differences in charismatic authority. In many parts of Anonymous, the three types of authority in internet communities described by O'Neil (2009, ch. 2) are present. Inspired from Weber's ideal types, they are called hacker charisma authority, index authority, and sovereign authority. Sovereign authority is the authority legitimized by the need to use power to insure the continuation of the community. On the internet, it takes the form of techno-social privileges: people are appointed or self-appointed to bear special power over an electronic platform and over their users. They are often called 'administrators', 'operators' or 'janitors'. The differentiation of power is legitimized by the fact that the community would not be able to live without it. Originally, administrative authority is needed to avert trolls and other disrupters.

For instance, during 'Operation Charlie Hebdo' in 2015, after the terrorist attacks that were perpetrated against the eponymous satirical French newspaper, one task was to list all Islamist Twitter accounts and refer them to the Twitter company. This cloud action needed a 'pad', a web application in which users can communally write documents in order to pool data. However, keeping a publicly editable pad in a large-scale operation is impractical because of the high probability of trolling and defacement of the pad. Some operators gave themselves the role of writing a locked pad that only they could write while the other users were providing them the data through private messages. I was frustrated by the time it took for the operators to update the data and I decided to create a public pad editable by everyone. The necessity to keep a locked pad was confirmed when I saw a few users vandalising and modifying the carefully written text that some co-operators and I had written into an incomprehensible mess.

Operators of an IRC channel have the power to mute, dismiss, and ban other users. The operators are granted these to keep communication safe from trolling disruption, but there is always the possibility that the operators use these powers for other purposes:

<Anon17>mod[erator]s—and janitors—those a supposed to be as invisible as possible—but some got carried on—but as usual, mods are Nazis—so there is a duality here too—you need janitors who dont ego trip [...]—thats why you need multiple irc platforms—with different staff—not just one

They have the potential to choose who can be part of the discussion and which discussions are relevant. Furthermore, they can influence the course of an operation:

<Anon11> i know \_\_\_\_ is a big player in a few ops—[s/he] saw some shit [s/he] didn't like, and [s/he] stepped right in—the owner of the channel is like "ok" to everything [s/he] says—now, i disagree with some of the stuff [s/he]'s saying—but i'm not even going to say it—because i know whatever [s/he] says goes

Not to say that operators usually use their powers beyond the need to keep communicative capabilities intact, or that collective action becomes hierarchical. Far from it. Some servers and channels try to keep themselves free from operatorship or at a minimum level, and in the end each operation has a different, *ad hoc* balance of power. Some operators have a strong hand in directing the course of operations, whereas other operators limit themselves to their role of safe-guarding communicative action. There is a whole spectrum of possibilities in between.

Finally, hacker authority is a type of charismatic authority rooted in the respect for hacking capabilities (O'Neil 2009, 37). It has been instrumental in the welcoming and rise to prominence in Ubiquitous of individuals and groups who possess skills in electronic penetration. Individuals who participate better in projects because of these skills benefit from charismatic authority, i.e. they have more opportunities to be popular, to be nominated for operatorship, and to be heard. Anonymous often shows ambiguous behaviour towards hacker authority. This is due to the odd mix between early Anonymous culture of self-effacement and the hacker culture that encourages the publicisation of one's feats, as we will see in section 7.4. On Anonymous IRC servers, anyone who would brag about one's own skills or bear a '133tspeak' handle would be mocked. Ironic stances concerning the (supposedly poor) hacking skills of Anons are also common.



I'm an 1337 h@x0r [i.e. elite hacker], I run Kali [open software] as my daily driver and I've DDoS'd over 100 confirmed IP addresses. I've created countless GUIs using visual basic to track IPs<sup>10</sup>, and that's just with my bare hands. Can I join? (AnonNews, February 2012)

On the other hand, in middle and small range operations, skilled persons are more than welcome and often benefit from heightened popularity. What could be called a small fandom (see figure 23) emerged when LulzSec, the splinter cell that focused on social engineering and electronic penetration, accomplished its “50 days of lulz” (Brian 2012), a spree of exploits from May to June 2011.



Figure 23. “for the most part, they are considered heroes” (Anon11). Photomontage of Topiary, a seminal member of LulzSec, published on 4chan after his arrest in July 2011.

Finally, index authority refers to the fact that agents acquire charismatic authority when they benefit from a higher number of connections than the average user (O’Neil 2009, 43). The internet is ridden with scale-free networks answering to a power law, with highly unequal distribution (e.g., 10% of existing web pages receiving 90% of the attention). In Anonymous, index authority is visible on the Twitter social media platform. The more an account has followers, the more it gets credibility and a stronger voice: “the

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<sup>10</sup> Reference to a quote of the television series ‘CSI’, ignorant gibberish that generated hilarity within computer-savvy circles and that became a meme. See video at <https://goo.gl/HQJRkN>.

happening of Twitter didn't help [the hivemind]—big accounts became de facto 'leader'—and their voice would silence all the rest” (Anon17). “now today with Twitter, like i have a fairly large following, and often journos [i.e. journalists] think i am so[me] kind of representative or leader” (ibid.). Some IRC servers have been criticised for their hierarchical administration and the alleged presence of law enforcement agents. Yet, they remain central hubs because they benefit from index charisma because they are older servers from which many successful operations have been managed and because a critical number of people and operations are present.

All of these mechanisms undermine the possibility of implementing the collective identity definitions of horizontality and participatory democracy. This creates differences between what should be and the actual practices. This tension triggers reactions attempting to reaffirm the CICDs.

### 7.3.3. Reaffirmation of horizontality and democracy

Horizontality and democracy are CICDs that are not in conflict with any other CICDs, and they are virtually accepted by all within the submerged network. Tensions arise from what users think the expression of these CICDs should be and what they see in practice.

First, different interpretations exist concerning the right application of horizontality and democracy. For instance, while some consider any form of specialisation of roles or position of authority as a betrayal of the principle of horizontality, others accept it as a need for successful collective action without considering it necessarily as leadership. For some Anons, acceptable and successful operatorship happens when a few operators manage things (therefore giving up the CICD of horizontality) but use their power to keep a balanced distribution of power between the rest of the population and a fair DMP.

<Anon11>I hate to use the word 'leaders' because I refuse to be led, but I will agree entirely with organizers  
<sylvian> have you ever seen conflict appearing between the channel op[erator] and the folks below?  
<anon12> Yes it happens, sometimes people will try and take too much control of whats going on—And then it gets messier —Eventually the op[eration] loses its focus and thats the end of that  
<sylvian> when you say people you mean the channel op[erators] or others too? you're linking trying to get control with the op[eration] loosing focus?  
<anon12> Of coarse! Some people try and take too much power in the channel, so trying to turn it into their own version. For example, op\_\_\_\_ had many different focuses because there were so many new operators. Eventually it caved in and gave up  
<sylvian> Ah!—So having a limited number of people directing an op is actually beneficial to the latter ?

<anon12> Definitely, let the users do the work and the directors direct. Normally things go faster that way if everyone is neutral!

Second, the limitations put to the expression of horizontality and democracy by the phenomena described in the last section render many interpretations of the application of these CICDs at odds with actual practices. One respondent bitterly recalled his/her experience in a DDoS mass action:

<Anon8>what did i do?—nothing—nothing other than serve coffee and cook rice like a silly intern in a big office that doesnt need me—a big office full of other silly interns doing the same [...]—people on the top playing everyone below—everyone is just another pawn—they send them out as sort of legions of mindless zombies

During Operation Avenge Assange, some Chanologists were also bitter concerning what they considered to be an exploitation of the newcomers by the higher-ups of AnonOps, allegedly used as ‘canon fodder’ during DDoS attacks, as the excerpt p. 138 shows.

This situation gives rise to reactions that attempt to reaffirms the CICDs and enforce their right application. Reaffirmations of CICDs can take the form of voicing concerns, deciding whether to participate in an operation, and creating alternatives. Examples are given below.

The revelation of the existence of marblecake, Chanology’s most infamous tree house, was met with uproar. WhyWeProtest was soon filled with messages complaining that marblecake had betrayed the spirit of Anonymous, belaboured marblecake members to stop their alleged cabalism, added accusations that it had been nudging the hivemind a bit too much into accepting plans of their own, or defending them by minimising their alleged manipulative behaviour:

Jesus, marblecake needs to get the fuck out of the hottub and back in the pool with us common bastards.

marblecake was a channel devised by a few moralfags to run CHANOLOGY behind everybodys back. While most people there will tell you that's not their stated purpose -- they've previously attempted to stack popular opinion polls on Enturbulation for monthly themes and the like in order to get "ininitives" they've come up with passed.

Marblecake exists, but it's not quite as horrible or terrible as you think it is. I know quite a few people in it, but I don't feel comfortable namefagging them since I actually like some of them. :/

The reaction was not only verbal: Anons reacted by attempting to apply a more decentralised organisation that would come closer to the CICDs of horizontality and democracy, by putting an emphasis on small and local cells

and initiatives, so that Chanology would not rely on a single hivemind that could be manipulated:

<Anon17> anonymous isn't supposed to have leaders—this one of the core ideas—when [marblecake] was discovered people begin to reverse toward decentralization—people were very not happy— individual websites for cells around the world where created and why we protest began to lose its central influence [...]—eventually cells will develop their own hierarchy, but the plan was that all of those could be a counter balance to the marble cake event

Ubiquitous also knows public belabour or complaints against what is allegedly betraying the principles of horizontality and democracy. Actions are also taken to reaffirm these CICDs by boycotting or leaving collective actions that have supposedly become too hierarchical. Often, alternative collective actions are created and run in an attempt to be more respectful of the CICDs. During DDoS mass actions for instance in 2010, some people have exited as an entire group when they considered operators took too much power and created their own (B.G. 2010). Below, is an excerpt of a discussion that took place in an operation channel of the AnonNet IRC server. A user from AnonOps came and asked people to join a similar operation of AnonOps on the pretence that it was more populated and that synergies would make the campaign more effective. Users from AnonNet refused on the ground that a regime of one-man leadership had been installed in the AnonOps operation.

<A [AnonOps user]>: The whole reason for me being here [i.e. AnonNet] is not to put this site down, but to plead the users of this irc to actually help out with the main op[eration] network [i.e. AnonOps], where things are updated more often and where, whether you like it or not, more anons are.

<B>[The] idea of [creating this AnonNet channel] was [that is was] only a temp[orary] thing [...] when AnonOps was offline [...]—nothing more [...]—now we just stay here because it pisses them [i.e. AnonOps] off[...]— [user X] on AnonOps just tells people what to do—here—we just vote on shit—so heres just more for the chill people really not wanting to follow a "leader" [...]

<A>: AnonOps is owned by very brilliant individuals who proposed and instituted a working solution to Anonymous' communication issues a few years back [...]

<B>: how about—we do our shit here and be all chill and vote on stuff—and AnonOps does there stuff there and gets told what to do by a "leader"—ok—its called diffrence of opinion—we both wanna do things diffrently here

<A>: The thing is, B, is that that's not how things are run anymore [...]

<C>: how things are run—oh man

<B>: C has a point yano [i.e. you know] why—because AnonOps is "run" by leaders

<D>more like—leadaars [...]

<B> [X] tries to be a leader—this is why we refuse to use AnonOps—we are all doing the same shit here—just without leadership [...]— it [is] certain channel op[erators] and people that are not "anonymous" since they try to make themselves into leaders

Eventually, the differences of interpretations on how to respect organisational CICDs become important factors of factionalisation. Some Anons come to consider that others are not ‘true’ Anons because they behave like leaders, and create alternative collective actions that will better express the CICD of horizontality and democracy.

#### 7.3.4. Conclusion

Anons consider themselves as autonomous beings who decide of their own actions and will not take orders. Anonymous as a collective is defined by its horizontal organisation, with no hierarchical specialisation nor chain of command. Anonymous also defines itself by its participatory democratic DMPs, with a focus on deliberation, consensus, direct vote, and rational discourse. One example is the hivemind-agera, an original DMP in which consensus arises from the selection of the best ideas, a rational discourse rendered pure by the removal of power distortions due to the impossibility to impose an author to an idea or argument.

These collective identity definitions are consensual: they are agreed upon virtually by all in the submerged network. They are therefore in a different situation than the CICDs embedded in the multipolar action system: those CICDs can be denied by some groups in favour of their polar opposite. By contrast, CICDs related to organisation are not in tension with other CICDs, but they are with the actual practices that appear during collective action.

Horizontality and participatory democracy are difficult to fully implement, and Anonymous does not escape the problems other social movements experience. Collective actions can first suffer from the “dictatorship of action” (Milan 2013a, 94), when the need for fast reactivity cancels deliberation and when Anons merely follow plans that have been pre-determined, or trust a few invested actors, or jump-in and mimic participants that are already in action. These situations are often ‘stand-alone complexes’, collective actions in which agents have no communication with one another but perform the same behaviour in the base of information published by Anonymous sources (e.g., guidelines for mass actions). Stand-alone complexes do not fulfil the CICD of participatory democracy but still express the CICD of personal autonomy because the agents keep their freedom whether to participate.

The second limitation of the implementation of participatory democracy is the “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman 1972). The progressive adoption of pseudonymity in Anonymous, i.e. the turn towards a system of indi-

vidual recognition, cancels the possibility of pure rational discourse through the reinstatement of authorship in the hivemind-agera. Moreover, with the lack of representative and specialised roles, shadow cliques of influence developed. Charismatic forms of authority emerged that created differences in the possibility to influence DMPs.

Most Anons do not accept these deviations from the defining principles of Anonymous and often rant against the ‘leaderfags’ (described in the next section), the persons who take a leading position, in interviews as well as publicly. Abusive language is directed towards IRC channels or forums, where some groups accuse others of not being ‘true’ Anonymous because they behave like leaders. These accusations are motives to create parallel collective actions that would express better the CICDs of participatory democracy and horizontality.

What does it say on the collective identity of Anonymous? CICDs in relation to organisational matters both concern shared characteristics of the participants—autonomy—and emergent properties of the collective, which are flat organisation and participatory democracy. Second, these CICDs are in a state of ‘dynamic stability’: they appeared early and are still present at the time of writing, but they need to be constantly reaffirmed (in a discursive manner or through action) because actual practices often fail to express them properly.

## 7.4. Anonymity and the ethics of self-effacement

*true Anon is 2 things:*

*believing in the real stuff—and not caring about your name*

*Anon21*

The use of anonymity has three legitimations in Anonymous: a practical one, a political one, and an ethical one. Anonymity was not an original characteristic of Anonymous, it was not a given at first, and the adoption of its practice was driven by the construction of what Anonymous meant as a group and what it meant for an individual to act *as* an Anonymous. Anonymity is used for practical reasons, for personal and group security. It is also used to enable a political project, the construction of the good community. Finally, it is a quality of the virtuous individual. Anonymity is a CICD inasmuch as it expresses an ethics of self-effacement, which also includes the will to insure horizontal organisation and democratic DMPs through daily actions. Finally, the CICD of anonymity is put in tension with actual practices in collective action, practices that are considered by some Anons as violating the principle of anonymity.

### 7.4.1. Agent anonymity: protecting oneself and others

Anonymity is legitimated through two functions similar to the typology that Wallace (1999) offers: recipient anonymity and process anonymity. Recipient anonymity is used for the sake of “protecting the anonymous person from actions by others” (29). For instance, HIV tests are anonymous mostly to protect the potentially HIV-positive patient from stigmatisation. In Anonymous, anonymity helps in avoiding retribution from the individuals, organisations and states that have been wronged by the movement. On the personal level, anonymity is a means of self-protection. It ‘encouraged’ channers to commit actions such as prank calls or the invasion of virtual worlds that could have been followed by (sometimes legal) retributions. The participants of Project Chanology used anonymity to protect themselves against possible reprisal from the CoS. Cardboards with the written phrase ‘Ask me why I wear a mask’ were often present in demonstrations. Finally, participants in Ubiquitous used anonymity to protect themselves against law enforcement when performing illegal actions.

<Anon9> As for myself, I was protecting my identity because online, your identity is easily traced (we all know this as journalists and operatives alike). But also, My anonymity protects not only me, but also my work and my family from targeting by whatever enemies (FBI and DHS [i.e. Department of Homeland Security] and rogue groups/people are examples).

Anonymity is also a communal failsafe against legal authorities: in Anonymous’ clandestine cells, as in all clandestine movements, not to know the identity of your peers protects them against arrest.

Though using anonymity for protection is a common practice in Anonymous, it does not appear to be a self-defining concept. Self-definitions related to anonymity concern the way of constructing the good community and the practice of an ethics of self-effacement, as it is shown in the next sections.

### 7.4.2. Process anonymity: building the good community

Process anonymity is a means “to preserve the validity or integrity of a process” (Wallace 1999, 30). For instance, test taking and peer reviews use anonymity to insure impartiality. In Anonymous, anonymity is used to enable a process of rational and pleasant conversations and DMPs. The use of anonymity is therefore a political project, the project of constructing a good community, by permitting the actualisation of the CICDs of horizontal organisations and democratic DMPs.

As mentioned in the introduction, anonymity was not a given in the first years of 4chan. At its inception, two options were offered when signing a post: either typing a nickname or leaving a blank field, which meant that the

message would then be signed ‘Anonymous’. In the early days of the image board, the norm was to sign one’s post, and people who criticised others’ points of view anonymously would be called cowards. Making anonymity into a norm within 4chan was an ideological project that was lobbied by part of the community and administrators. From February 2006 to April 2007 anonymity was enforced (users could not type in a nickname) by the founder himself. ‘Forced anonymous’ would be applied on and off until 2013, when users are able to sign with a nickname again.

Pro-anonymity people (that contestants would first call ‘the hivemind’, in a derogatory manner), wished to make the community of 4chan similar to that of ‘2chan’, the Japanese image board which code was duplicated to create 4chan. To try to implement anonymity was, as a respondent expressed, to attempt to “copy and paste its social code this time” (AnonF).

‘Shii’, the administrator of 4chan during the first years, was a strong lobbyist and zealot of anonymity who publicly gave the following arguments. The practice of anonymity in an image board causes changes in individual behaviour and group interactions that give way to the construction of a fruitful, pleasant-to-live-in community. First, anonymity attracts the good people and repels the bad ones: bad people are lazy and have all the time to register for a pseudonym while the good ones have busy lives and might not have time. Trolls might find the process of registration to be a first challenge and excite them to annoy the community.

Second, “anonymity counters vanity”: “On a forum where [...] people give themselves names, a clique is developed of the elite users, and posts deal as much with who you are as what you are posting. On an anonymous forum, if you can't tell who posts what, logic will overrule vanity” (Shii 2004). As a result, discussions become more pleasant and fruitful because there can be no considerations of ego and hubris, races for popularity, arguments of personal enmities, and because the ideas posted are judged by their intrinsic quality and not the popularity of the person who wrote them.

Everywhere else [than 4chan] was concerned with building up a reputation, working your way into the important cliques on the site, getting noticed for who you were rather than what you knew. There were explicit hierarchies all around you, all the time. With anonymity, one can actually assume everyone else on the board is as smart and clever as you are you find yourself talking up to the room, as opposed to down to it. (Shii, from Stryker 2011, 147)

One of the respondents explained that what attracted him on 4chan was the interesting discussions that resulted from the fact that people did not fear to speak their mind thanks to the enforcement of anonymity.

<Anon6> the original place the word [‘Anonymous’] resonated with me was on 4chan and the idea of posting something without any ties to myself [...]— i had never seen anything so brilliant, literally speaking ur mind on whatever



u wanted was incredible. and to have so many people agree and discuss it was better than normal conversation with mates at [the] uni[versity] at times—i thought it revolutionary—and enlightening—it really opened my eyes to what the internet truly is imo [i.e. in my opinion]—which is information and knowledge sharing

During the first years of 4chan, proponents of anonymity gained some ground, “through a combination of bottom-up organic changes (some people were anonymous from the beginning) and a change in attitude from the mod[eration] team” (Shii, from Stryker 2011, 145). This progression, however, did not occur without arguments and debates. Chanologists would later carry forward the same idea of anonymity as functional for the construction of the good community by aspiring to implement it to its DMPs: with anonymity, “the goal is to make it hard for everyone to have the power to define narratives within the movement—[...]so within Anon its always been a struggle—between power hungry, ego driven people—and those who want it [democracy] to work” (Anon17).

Finally in activist Anonymous, practicing anonymity is also a means to empower the collective:

<Anon17> there are the people who participate fully into the public side of things—forums irc— and those who you never see—but still have an impact—the impact gets added into the whole Anonymous imagery—re enforcing the legion thing—its important—it boosts moral when you see something good happening—from nowhere—it empowers everyone—so always claiming credit for things is bad—its way better to give the credit to anonymous—not inserting any handles—it helps the whole thing to leave your ego at the door—its like reading a good thread on 4chan—and having all sorts of people contributing—for all your know it could be the same person—but for whatever reasons it always look bigger and more mysterious when things are foggy—it's better to have a all anonymous forums with 25 members on it than a non anon one with a 100. your anon forum/ima[g]e board will look less empty—the more you can create diagram like Anon21 posted [see Appendix 7] the least you can have an impact as a 'legion'—you lose the mystic appeal—thats why i think one of the most under rated subgroup (of Anonymous) are those who dont seek any attention at all

### 7.4.3. Choosing anonymity: the ethics of self-effacement

The construction of the good community is the rationale for practicing an ethics of self-effacement. This ethics is what one should do *as* an Anon *in* Anonymous; it is a CICD defined as a shared behaviour within the collective. What I call ethics of self-effacement is the propensity or the choice for the Anons to refrain from expressing their ego by signing their deeds or seeking power. It can also be found in the stylistics used during discussions denoting humility, where users underline that the opinion they are giving is a subjective view and does not assume universal truth; formulas such as

“IMO” [i.e. in my opinion] or YMMV”[i.e. your mileage may vary] are common on WhyWeProtest, as well as more original formulas like “You should never trust what I say without other sources to corroborate because I’m kinda retarded”. The expression “also, cocks” is commonly added after a lengthy and developed argument to balance its gravitas and to make the reader understand that the author does not take herself too seriously.

Self-effacement is different from some interpretations of humility and modesty concerning self-evaluation. Garcia (2006) defines humility as being unimpressed with ourselves: “the humble are those who are unimpressed with their own admired or envied features (or admirable or enviable ones), those who assign little importance to their possession of characteristics in which they instead might well take pride” (Garcia 2006, 417). It is not the same as self-effacement: an Anon might well be very proud of her own feat, but will not reveal that she is the author. The ethics of self-effacement is, with the same logic, different from Driver’s interpretation of modesty as underestimation of one’s own capacity (Driver 1999), or Flanagan’s interpretation of modesty as the lack of overestimation (Flanagan 1990). The concept of self-effacement is directed toward behavior. Inward causes and mechanisms can differ as shown below.

The ethics of self-effacement is one of the most peculiar characteristics of Anonymous, and it is the most frustrating trait to research: self-effacement, indeed, includes the behaviour of not showing off traits of self-effacement (Garcia 2006, 427) and especially during interviews, when the respondent wants to show to the researcher a certain aspect of herself: “To the degree that a key component of humility is a ‘forgetting of the self’, self reflection, and self-report of one’s humility might be oxymoronic” (Tangney 2000, 78). As such, my analysis comes mostly from reading between the lines in interviews, forum archives and IRC conversations. In interviews, I had to ask direct, probing questions. Answers were often followed with self-deprecation or irony:

<sylvian> why do you prefer to be anonymous?  
<Anon6>probably the way i was raised—to do good things for people without reward—i have always been liek that—i dont know i am a weird one [...]—[I] probably sound like the biggest douche [now]—haha [...]—i think anonimity resonated with me as a core principle of anonymous

The ethics of self-effacement is, in fact, publicly expressed in a negative manner, by criticising those who do not perform it. There is indeed a constant rant within Anonymous circles against ‘namefags’, ‘famefags’, and ‘leaderfags’. ‘Namefags’ are Anonymous members who decide to reveal their identity inside or outside the group, using their real names or pseudonyms to attach their actions to their self. The expression ‘famefag’ focuses on the fact that the Anon gives up anonymity to attain popularity and fame.

A leaderfag is an Anon who yearns for power, who wants to lead operations and give orders. Because of them, the Anonymous collective allegedly becomes corrupted and loses its defining properties of horizontality and democracy. They are ‘the cancer killing Anonymous’ and they should not have their place in the movement. By contrast, the refusal to lead and to use authority, to not be a leaderfag, shows two things: first that the individual is a good citizen because she contributes to the construction of the good community (horizontal and democratic) by sacrificing the potential enjoyment of power; second that she holds a virtue and is psychologically balanced, because striving for power is usually considered selfish and corrupting. Namefagging and leaderfagging are often considered to go together: one gets famous by gaining authority, and vice versa:

<A> commander x [an Anon who went public] is a shitty hacker crybaby—all he does is bitch and moan and act like a leaderfag—then when he was gonna off himself he chickened out because he's an attention whore (Anonymous IRC, August 2013)

One instance of namefag is the ‘tripfag’ on 4chan. The image board offers to its users a technical option, the ‘tripcode’, which is a technical securisation of identification that prevents possible attempts at impersonation. If recognition can be useful in certain cases such as when a user wants to tell a story through successive messages, the practice is mocked most of the time. Tripfags who use tripcodes are usually considered posers who attempt to compensate their lack of self-esteem by trying to be recognised by the community and trying to become popular. Below is the invective of an Anon toward a tripfag (see also figure 24):

[...]because if you post anonymously by default but choose to gain a sense of identity in your posting, it most likely means that you are an attention grubbing whore who has their heart on being a board celebrity rather than actually contributing anything worthwhile. (Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015e)

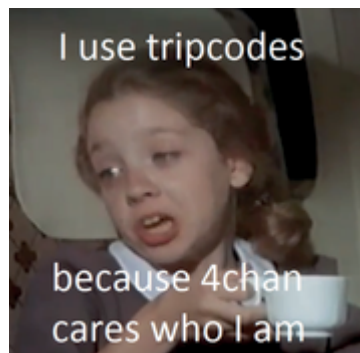


Figure 24. Meme published in Encyclopaedia Dramatica (Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015e).

Interpellation of namefags are also common in Chanologists and Ubiquitous platforms:

[I] stopped reading as soon as I saw you were a namefag. Go Anonymous or gtfo. No one cares for attention whore. (AnonNews, July 2012)

if you truly were "Anonymous" then you would see that namefagging is egotistical you now form segregation between you and others, you ruin the hive mind [...] If i was you i would do some self reflection as you are obviously too naive to be part of this (ibid.)

Everybody must learn how to be anonymous. Its our fucking label, holy crap. [...] Also to be an anon not only means to be an anon to the outside but to be anon to other anons. don't ask for personal details, don't tell them. Yeah DONT ASK DONT TELL in eris name! (ibid.)

Pseudonimity in 2012 in forums was often considered as namefagging. A thread in AnonNews was monopolised to 'dox' the namefags talking in the threads, and potentially harass them:

<A>Lets step towards a cleaner future for anonymous D0x these fags ! LU-Lacaust the new fags [...]

<B>The cancer must be cured. Keep this thread bumped and on top. Namefag eradication is the first step to a cleaner and more productive Anonymous [...]

<C> They aren't anons, they're namefags. This a purging to cleanse the Hive. Also, you're a namefag in disguise with your damn signature. Drop it and return to an Anonymous state or be Dox'd and pizza bombed. (anonNews, June 2012)

By contrast, the image of the individual who chooses anonymity is, like with leaderlessness, first the demonstration of being a good citizen, a person who does not want to "disturb the hivemind" (AnonP), second a show of virtue, that of a psychologically healthy persons who do not need any recognition in exchange of their contributions to keep their balance. During activist actions, there is nobleness in not asking for any recognition when helping people:

<Anon11> we are supposed to respect the fact that what we do is for the greater good—we are supposed to care more about the effectiveness of hitting our targets than building our own reputations—its part of the ideology.

<Anon6> [...] always felt that selfless acts should remain anonymous, not even bragged about among the best of friends, because anyone knowing takes away the thrill of seeing others helped and not being able to repay whom ever helped them—the good Samaritan has always tried to keep from being able to be even thanked.

The ethics of selflessness, when it comes to its origin, is usually conceived in two manners in Anonymous. The first one is a Foucauldian conception of ethics as a choice, a personal decision, a decision to follow a norm without external pressure instead of morals, a decision that the person takes in order to build her own individuality, to add a characteristic, a self-defining trait as a good person (Foucault 1985, 25).

<Anon4>LOL. I have no ego. [...]—Lots of LSD and shrooms back in the day—Plus Buddhism / theology studies and meditation—My goal was ego-destruction—It worked.

In this case, the individual might give a conscious effort to apply a behaviour that might go against her own desires. For instance, the Anon might well care about what people think of her feat, but prefer to stay Anonymous because the ethics and its expressions are more important in her mind than the need for ego confirmation. The second conception is self-effacement as a virtue ethics, the one considered by Aristotle and most of the Western tradition (Hursthouse 2013). There, self-effacement is a virtue, a character trait, a psychological disposition well entrenched in its possessor (ibid.). As such, self-effacement agrees with the definition of humility given by Roberts and Wood as the contrary of vanity; “a striking or unusual unconcern to be well regarded by others, and thus a kind of emotional insensitivity to the issues of status... The humble person is not ignorant of her value or status, but unconcerned about it and this inattentive to it.” (Garcia 2006, 420). As with the CICDs concerning organisation, certain tensions arise between Anons that interpret and apply anonymity in different manners.

#### 7.4.4. Interpreting and performing anonymity

The practice of pure anonymity is pervasive to Anonymous until the early days of Chanology when a new population arrives that is not aware of its meaning as the construction of the good community. Different understandings of the legitimacy of anonymity and tolerance for recognition developed.

<Anon14> [...] as soon as the media started mentioning chanology protests—attention whores started coming to anon like bees to a flower  
<sylvian> I guess they were mocked at first...  
<Anon14> yes, originally that was the natural reaction—but as anon diversified all over the net and spawned a metric ton of splinter groups—different levels of tolerance for attention whores developed I guess.

On the ‘radical’ end of the spectrum, are the Anons who consider that nothing should be related to their identity, that they should not be recognised from one message to the next or one conversation to the next. These are the persons who keep the handle ‘anonymous’ on forums and who use ‘burner’

nicknames on IRC (i.e. they change their nickname frequently). Another category of Anons considers that their writing can be the object of recognition and that anonymity only applies to acts. Nicknames can be kept, but claiming deeds performed during Anonymous collective actions or anywhere else remain out of the question. Next to this category are the Anons who consider that relating oneself to one's act is permitted when it goes to the members of the same cell, notably because of practical reasons related to teamwork. Finally, on the most 'liberal' side of the spectrum, some consider that anonymity only applies in relation to their offline identity, and that linking one's acts with one's nickname is acceptable. These are the ones that are usually accused of namefagging by the rest of the community. Some namefags, using their nicknames, are more accepted than others, when namefagging is legitimated for practical reasons:

<Anon17> \_\_\_\_ is a namefag cause it makes some things much easier for [him/her], like hosting this site, payin for infrastructure—etc.—but not like other namefags [he/she] is not egodriver. as i know [him/her] [he/she]s a smart and humble [Anon] dedicated to a cause.

Finally, Anons who decide to actively and willingly go public are exceptions. They usually face harsh criticisms and usually loose their right to be considered as Anons, and are referred by their civil name or by the name of their hacker team. Known willingly public Anons were 'Commander X' (from the hacker team 'People's Liberation Front'), Gregg Housh (unofficial spokespersons of Chanology as explained in section 7.5.2), and Deric Lostutter (founder of splinter cell 'KnightSec').

In addition, the legitimacy of anonymity can be different between different types of action, and so are the interpretations concerning how anonymous they should be.

<Anon11> but it really depends—sometimes signing is acceptable—tutorial signing is allowed by Anonymous—in their [AnonOps] opnewblood channel, if you choose a tutorial to learn—it will say who provided the informationso, signing isn't completely frowned upon—that probably promoted someone—rather than getting them shunned—it really depends on what your doing

An interesting phenomenon shows how for some the norm of anonymity can be combined with a need for recognition. The arrival of hackers during Chanology and especially in Ubiquitous put the ethics of self-effacement in tension with a part of the hacker culture that Thomas (2002, 16) calls "boy culture". Thomas makes reference to the work of Anthony Rotundo (1993) on manhood. Rotundo claims that twentieth century youth culture was defined by aggressiveness and competition. Thomas believes that the hacker scene is the twenty-first century heir of boy culture, with its practices of system penetration and competition between hackers and hackers team

where the important questions are who will hack the most secure systems, and how many of them<sup>11</sup> (Anons often talk derogatively of “dick measuring” (Anon8) to describe hacker’s activities). Signing is done for the recognition of the team, the recognition of oneself, and to become more trusted and respected within a team.

<Anon11>in splinter groups [i.e. hacker teams close to Anonymous], [signing] may be a requirement—whoever taught that [name] hacker—probably said, "and if you get into a system, make sure you say this, for our people!"—and its really up to their teaching, and a novice wants to please the group—so they can rise in the ranks [of the hacker team]—[also] beginners love being "known" for something—[just like] in the movie ‘hackers’—"hey i'm blah blah, you know, i hacked the blah blah blah"—response, "oh, your blah blah! ok wow! nice!"—even in the movie the matrix—"your trinity?"—"THE trinity... that hacked the blah blah"

The recognition needed for competing is visible for instance when hackers deface a website, with texts such as ‘hacked by X from team Y’ added to the webpage.

Anonymous negotiates the contradiction between Anonymous’ ethics of self-effacement and hacker culture by creating a set of practices that satisfies both those who want to keep Anonymous anonymous and those who seek recognition. Hackers are able to act either in the name of Anonymous and respect its credo of non-authorship, or to sign in one’s name and to recognise themselves as a companion of Anonymous, but not part of it during collective action. This applies to previous hackers deciding to join Anonymous as well as to previous Anons who decide to create ‘splinter cells’ and reclaim their deeds while still participating in Anonymous actions.

#### 7.4.5. Conclusion

Anonymity is a central concept to define what one does as an Anon. Anonymity carries three functions: first, it protects Anons from the risks inherent in collective action, may it be personal retribution after a prank, avoiding harassment from potentially hostile organisations, or avoiding arrest by law enforcement.

Second, it permits the construction of the good community, i.e. the assurance that there will be no emergence of leadership and authority because of the lack of identification, the possibility to have sensitive discussions because there can be no disruption created by differences of authority, show-

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<sup>11</sup> Electric and computer hacking fits all the more boy culture that its morphology and vocabulary is replete with ports and plugs, penetrations and flows, and other imageries that could easily enthuse the imagination of young minds.

off and battles of ego. It also permits, for the same reason, the creation of a Habermasian rational discourse that is both democratic and efficient. It finally permits to empower the community by offering an illusion of multiplicity

Because it enables the construction of the good community, the practice of anonymity is part of an ethics of self-effacement. Anonymity is the mark of the good citizen because the practice helps the construction and maintenance of the good community, and the mark of the virtuous human being as a healthy and balanced person. The ethics of self-effacement also includes a practice of 'leaderlessness', i.e. the refusal to lead or to use unwarranted influence. Through this practice, good citizens insure the continuance of an egalitarian and democratic organisation while at the same time they are considered good and balanced persons for not striving for selfish and psychologically corrupting power.

What does it say about the collective identity of Anonymous? First, concerning the unity of collective identity: the CICD of the ethics of self-effacement is not in conflict with another CICD, but neither is it spread on the entire submerged network. It is very present among the Anon veterans and those dedicated to the movement, less among newcomers and users participating more occasionally. Concerning stability, it is in the same situation as the organisational CICDs seen in the last section: it has been existing since the beginning of Anonymous, but it always needs to be reaffirmed against practices that are considered not to be in accord with the principle, through discursive interactions, boycotts or creation of new collective actions or new platforms of communication. Concerning the origin of collective identity, the ethics of self-effacement is particular: depending on its interpretation, it is either an essentialist trait of collective identity, the shared psychological predisposition of the participants; or, when it is a chosen practice that is not originally a natural trait of the individual, it concerns the individual construction of herself by herself as an ethical person.

## 7.5. On being nothing and everything: Anonymous as a universal entity

During the participatory observation period of the study, I sometimes encountered Anons who were disconcerted by my topic. To them, Anonymous could not be defined; everyone had a different view on what it was and, if there were a defining property, it was that it could not be defined. This section focuses on this concept of non-definability. I call it the collective identity definition of universality. Its basic principles are that Anonymous can be everything and anyone can be an Anon. First, the concept of universality is developed. Then, it is explained how this definition creates problems when Anonymous is pressured to define itself to those outside of the submerged



network, and how non-identity becomes a main point of self-definition for the outside. Finally, it is shown how one component of the idea of universality, the notion that Anonymous is ‘an idea’, is expressed and how these expressions reinforce the concept of universality.

### 7.5.1. Anonymous as a universal entity

When I presented my work for feedback to an Anon respondent, after a few seconds the following text appeared on my screen: “you don’t understand anything do you?” (AnonK). Such a quick reaction was due to the word ‘identity’ written on the title. It was revealing my lack of comprehension of a movement that could not, intrinsically, have an identity. Anonymous cannot be defined, which is what the term ‘identity’ hinted to. ‘Identity’ also suggested to my respondent three concepts: permanence, uniformity, and exclusiveness. These concepts are incompatible with a self-definition of Anonymous that I call ‘universality<sup>12</sup>’ and that has two components: inclusiveness and dynamic diversity.

Inclusiveness is the notion that everyone is a potential Anon. It is a founding principle of 4chan, and as such the image board does not perform a selection of users and registration is not required. This openness is a part of the political project of creating a platform that can host open and fruitful discussions seen in section 7.4.2. The practice of anonymity also played a role in the development of inclusiveness:

<Anon9> I don't think people were anonymous so they didn't get v& [i.e. arrested], it was more so that when you and everybody around you wears a mask (V[irtual] P[rivate] N[etwork], proxy, et al [i.e. techniques of anonymisation on the internet]) their ideas aren't associated with a specific demographic, and therefore seemingly not biased.—Simply put, technically nobody can be racist, tribalist, regionalist or what have you when all of the people in a given scenario are faceless and nameless. This is also how the collective was able to bypass the cultural and language differences amongst themselves.

Inclusiveness comes to tension with the countercultural characteristics of Anonymous: dedicated users of 4chan (especially in the channel /b/, which expresses offense and parrhesia the most) constantly worry that the website loses its edge and becomes ‘mainstream’, especially from the Habbo hotel raid of July 2006 and the following mediatisation of the site that led to a rise in traffic, reaching exponential proportions in 2007 (anonymous 2015, 19).

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Universality’ refers to a CICD pervasive to the whole submerged network, while I use the term ‘Ubiquitous’ to name the third branch of Anonymous presented in the second chapter.

The strong desire to keep 4chan from becoming mainstream is expressed post-ironically by the ‘rules of the internet’ written by channers that appeared in late 2006 (knowyourmeme 2016). The first two rules paraphrase those of the ‘Fight Club’ of the eponymous movie: “1) Do not talk about /b/, 2) do NOT talk about /b/”.

As a result, there are constant rants that newfags (i.e. newcomers) are ‘the cancer killing /b/’, that Anonymous has lost its edge, and that /b/ was much better before. Channers are self-conscious of these fears and try to make fun of them just as it makes fun of everything else. The 4chan banner in figure 25 shows a slice of the life of the image board: on the background the post of an ‘oldfag’ (veteran of the image board) complaining about the decrepitude of /b/, and on the foreground some (actual or imagined) mocking reactions of newfags using a vernacular typical of young adolescents originating from more ‘mainstream’ (and therefore reviled) electronic platforms.



Figure 25. 4chan banner superimposing ‘oldfag’ rant with ‘newfag’ mockery.

Therefore, from the beginning of the rise in popularity of 4chan on the internet in 2006, Anonymous has an uneasy relationship with its boundaries, which comes from the tensions between the CICD of inclusiveness and the wish to keep the expressions of the countercultural CICDs of offense and parrhesia. The same uneasiness remained during the activist turn with the outpouring of newcomers unaware of Anonymous’ countercultural CICDs, and the CICD of inclusiveness was often criticised by lulzfags for the same reason (as seen in the excerpt p. 131). Eventually, 4chan remained an open platform because inclusiveness is one of its most self-defining feature compared to other electronic platforms. In activist Anonymous, the pragmatic need for enrolling as many individuals as possible so that activist Anonymous could become more powerful supported the expression of the CICD of inclusiveness. Within activist Anonymous, the tension was partly resolved through processes of acculturation, self-selection and ousting described in section 7.2.2.

Some Anons celebrate their universality in these terms on the forum WhyWeProtest:

<A> [Anonymous] is the gathering of many different people from all walks of life into one collective entity with no face and no name. Anonymous is humanity unfiltered. [...]

<B> Anonymous is exactly that: anonymous. We exist without existing, act without acting and strike without striking. Anonymous is no one and everyone. Anyone can be anonymous, and Anonymous can be anyone.

<C> Hell yes Anonymous is beautiful. Anonymous is legion. Anonymous is strong. Anonymous is black. Anonymous is white. Anonymous is gay. Anonymous is straight. Anonymous is male. Anonymous is female. Anonymous is young. Anonymous is old. Anonymous is everything and everyone.

Dynamic diversity, the other component of universality, means that Anonymous can become anything, especially when it comes to its range of action. Many Anons however consider that some of the CICDs described above are exceptions, and that they need to be stable so that Anonymous keep making sense.

Considering that the pranks and the first activist actions are, as I claim, externalised continuations of the practice of parrhesia as well as the defence of what enables it, the right to free speech and publication of information, Anonymous originally had ideological bases that opened a wide array of topics to act upon. Project Chanology concentrated first on the issue of freedom of information and the uncovering of lies. Anonymous Iran, the second Chanologists project, reacted against internet censorship as well. Operation Avenge Assange, one of the first operations of Ubiquitous, was a reaction against attacks against a whistleblowing organisation.

Anonymous extended its topics of activism even wider through two mechanisms of ‘capillarisation’: the exposure to the enemy, and the arrival of newcomers carrying new plans. The CoS and the Iranian regime were not just violating freedom of speech: the CoS was also violating other human rights and the Iranian regime was violating democratic expression. Anons who were participating in the operations became conscious of these other stakes, and would later use them as reasons to launch new operations (e.g., those concerning the Arab spring, which were not created specifically as a reaction against freedom of information, but as a reaction against the oppressive behaviour of non-democratic states). A similar mechanism is at work with the arrival of newcomers: they might participate in collective actions for other reasons than the original ones, such as newcomers in Chanology who acted because of the CoS’ violation of human rights and not for the specific violation of freedom of information.

A few months after the formation of Ubiquitous, it came to a point in which capillarisation was not needed to extend Anonymous’ field of activism. The large number of Anonymous’ operations led to the emergence of the CICD of dynamic diversity, meaning that Anonymous can always find

new topics to act on. This resulted in Anonymous being able to potentially touch upon anything, which legitimated the creation of operations relatively unrelated to their predecessors, with themes such as the environment, legalisation of marijuana, or sexual abuse. The CICD of dynamic diversity is widely shared in the submerged network, but it is also the object of criticism, some Anons stating that it dissolved itself and lost power due to the multiplication of activist collective actions: “I think it’s a huge waste of time not to be engaging in larger operation, and instead focusing on all these smaller operations with little to no impact on the world and the security of all those in it” (Anon9).

### 7.5.2. The problem of self-definition towards the public.

*I mean it's 2015 and [the journalists] still refer to Anon as a "shadowy hacker group"—they still don't get it*

*Anon14*

The self-definition of universality creates a dilemma when it comes to presenting the movement to the public. There have been times when users thought it was a necessary thing to do and the topic regularly generates debates on the right way to do it. The first and central question is usually on the meta-level: should Anonymous define itself?

There are two contradicting needs that make the question difficult to answer. On the one hand, publicly defining oneself goes against one common interpretation of the CICD of universality, which is that Anonymous is undefinable. On the other, as explained in section 7.2.3, the activist part of Anonymous is more efficient when it benefits from a good public image, and an effort of self-definition towards the public can potentially participate to the construction of such a good public image.

This section analyses a forum discussion that concerned the need for writing a press release to the press. This discussion and the arguments presented are representative of other discussions on the same topic. Afterwards, it is discussed how Anonymous circles negotiated the issue of spokespersons.

#### **A forum discussion concerning press releases**

A thread on WhyWeProtest in December 2010 (<https://goo.gl/JrPvYs>) was one of the first discussions Chanologists had during the formation of Ubiquitous at the time of ‘Operation Avenge Assange’ and which concerned the relations with the press. The latter, indeed, did not make the difference between Chanologists and what would become Ubiquitous Anonymous, and it was generalising the action system positioning of ‘Avenge Assange’ and therefore generalising the problematic use of illegal methods. This raised

some concerns from a part of the Chanology community. The creator of the thread proposed to collaboratively write a transcript to use in press releases and interviews. The main worry was that journalists were portraying Anonymous as hackers and hacktivists, which most Chanologists did not consider themselves to be. The author also feared that journalists would begin to describe Anons as criminals in that they were focused on the DDoS attacks committed at that time.

The author recognised that it is “frowned upon” to send out press releases, but that they should still do it; otherwise, the Chanologists would lose the public relationship battle. Next to messages supporting the initiatives (“Media only report what they know”), some users wrote the following criticisms. First, Anonymous, as a universal entity, cannot be defined by an individual or a group: “Anonymous will never set the story straight once and for all. [...] And you are giving your personal opinion of what anonymous is. So does the media. Anyway, nothing can stop Anonymous because Anonymous cannot be defined”. Second, it might actually be a good idea that Anonymous keeps a “veil of secrecy” in that keeping a romantic shadow of mystery can be a good thing to tantalise the press and public. Third, if a transcript were released for the press, the latter might not make use of it and may distort its meaning: as a participant argued, “a profit orientated news company will report anything that makes a good story provided there isn’t obvious evidence to the contrary”.

Anonymous had indeed become wary of the press because of its need for sensationalism. Exciting techniques such as DDoS, website defacement, and leaks are those that are the most talked about by the mass media: “the press only wanted to know about ddos—like it’s some kind of special sexy wonder-weapon” (Anon20). “they seemed to be interested in some dramatic angle, to make it cool. and they always seemed disappointed when i told them we didn’t hack.” (Anon18). After some time, it was suggested that a legitimate text should be written only if it was clearly stated that the text came from a specific group of Anons and not from the whole movement. One Anon submitted a draft of the first paragraphs.

I'd just like to make it clear before I begin that I am most certainly NOT claiming to be a representative of Anonymous, for such a thing does not exist. Anyone who contacts you in the future claiming to be a representative of Anonymous most certainly is NOT a representative of Anonymous, because that isn't how it works.

This transcript is the collaboration of what we will refer to, just for now, as a 'group' of people within Anonymous, and its intention is to shed some light into what Anonymous is, what common beliefs led to the forming of such a group from within Anonymous, and how the sheer nature of Anonymous itself also works destructively against their cause

Another proposal recommended that 50 press releases should be sent to 50 media outlets. It was not pursued. People then discussed the matter of what should be included in the text. Should they write about their main beliefs such as freedom of speech or human rights? Should they write about the fact that they do not believe in illegal actions? Should they talk mainly about their type of organisation instead? Eventually, the creator of the thread offered a compromise. A text was written and sent to media outlet, with its main theme concerned about how Anonymous cannot be identified. The main CICD Chanologists offered to the press was universality.

### **The issue of spokespersons**

The idea of public representation is the object of the same contradiction between the CICD of universality—no one could possibly speak for Anonymous—and the CICD of the hero archetype, which needs to give a good image of itself. Spokespersons have the same role of press releases, which is to influence journalists. Another tension is added with the topic spokesperson in the sense that the role can be considered in contradiction with the CICDs of flat organisation and the ethics of self-effacement: being a spokesperson puts you in a position of fame and power (and in practice, accusations of famefagging and leaderfagging were quick to arrive).

In Chanology, the tension was handled as the movement found a half-appointed, half-de-facto, not-quite-official-or-representative spokesperson in the person of veteran black hat<sup>13</sup> and hacktivist Gregg Housh, a seminal and important participant of Anonymous:

<Anon17> no one speaks for anonymous—you only speak on your behalf  
<Anon23> well, we didn't stick to that really, because someone had the keys to the golden youtube channel [that is access to a popular Anonymous YouTube account] [...]—I think it more meant that noone but gregg spoke for Anon[...]  
<sylvian> Anon23, and people were accepting gregg was the only guy talking for Anon? I hguess it created tensions  
<Anon17> well—if i can give my take on that—dealing with IRL [In Real Life] world at some point you come to the conclusion that its hard to go on without having someone to speak on tv/radio—since gregg had already been namefag [i.e. outed] by the cult [i.e. the CoS]—(he was charged)  
<Anon23> it did, but most people [outside of Anonymous] in the beginning were just happy that everything went so well. They didn't know about the behind the scenes shit [i.e. debates concerning spokespersons] till late

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<sup>13</sup> A 'black hat' hacker is usually understood as a computer engineer who uses her skills for illegal system penetration; a 'white hat' hacker tests the security of systems to make them better. A 'grey hat' hacker does both, often a white hat at her job with her 'official identity' and a black hat in her criminal or hacktivist more shadowy life.

<Anon17> he happened to be a good choice—also yes—Anon23 is right—  
for people outside of the politics of anon—it seemed natural—in a way—  
kept asking for someone to talk to—and you cant go on with a mask on tv  
[...]—and gregg was more than willing to go—since he already been in the  
media due to the cult taking him to court  
<sylvian> and this is one of the most central problem with this sort of new  
type of organisation because the outside needs a point of reference  
<Anon17> yeah ive thought a long time about this—i dont think its necessary  
[to have a spokesperson]—and its the media who should adapt—[we] made a  
mistake [...]—we should have stuck to our cores.

Gregg Housh, however, always tried to make clear in his interviews that he was just a participant in Anonymous and not a spokesperson. He also made it clear that he did not represent Anonymous officially. Still, the press found in him an anchor when attempting to grasp the movement.

In the beginning of Ubiquitous, which was during ‘Operation Avenge Assange’, the situation was different: several Anons talked to the media during the operation, some respected and influential some not. After ‘Avenge Assange’, the continued presence of several Anons who continued their correspondence with the media became a problem for the collective, both because of the risk of giving skewed information to the media and because fame-fagging was not tolerated after a certain point. In several important operations of Ubiquitous, an informal rule emerged in about 2012 stating that no one should talk to the press alone. Press releases would be written collectively and published with the consent of the active participants in the operation. Those who would transgress this rule would be subjected to disciplinary action, usually using as punishment a temporary or permanent ban from IRC channels. The excerpt I used p. 92 is from a discussion that concerned such disciplinarian action.

<R> Okay, so it came down to remove you from op\_\_\_ for the next day. [...] The reason is because of the media interactions that have been going on the past 2 days. [...] The short and long of it is that you should have been keeping in communication with everyone else about the media items you've been doing and not making unilateral decisions on it. [...]  
<C> i dont have time to argue about it—no talk to media—24 hour ban  
[...] <A> WHERE'S YOUR NO MEDIA LAW—SHOW ME —where is it?—in your fucking head?—you stupid fucking faggot—I CANT READ MINDS—WHERE IS IT AT? [...]  
<C> every person involved with ops knows this [...]  
<A> no—they fucking dont—you dumb ass  
<C> look at why <X> lost his oper[atorship] on \_\_\_ —no talking to media [...]—its standard

Often though, Ubiquitous IRC servers have a ‘journalist’ channels managed by Anons with authority where journalists can ask questions. For a period of

time, ethnographer Gabriella Coleman also played the role of unofficial spokesperson, Anons redirecting journalists to her.

Eventually, it was believed that journalists were continually distorting or ignoring the public statements of Anonymous activists in order to portray the community as a collection of malicious and somewhat dangerous pranksters ((Klein 2015) confirms that it is indeed the main description the mass media gives of Anonymous). The press became distrusted and it was decided that minimal interaction would be the best solution:

once the media gets it wrong not much sense trying to correct them, they are gods and they know better. [...] someone who was involved tries to set the media straight, and that always ends badly because once they get an idea you cannot change their minds until everyone who heard the wrongness is dead and their children are close to death (Anon7).

The next section focuses on another component of the CICD of universality, namely the definition of Anonymous as ‘an idea’.

### 7.5.3. The idea of Anonymous

The collective identity definition of universality has as component the weariless statement that ‘Anonymous is an idea’. This is similar to the definition of inclusiveness, i.e. that everyone can potentially be Anonymous. In the Anonymous network, stating that Anonymous is an idea implies that it is a sign that can be used by anyone, and whether an action is recognised as an Anonymous action depends on the opinion of the rest of the submerged network:

ANONYMOUS is nothing but an idea, an internet meme, that can be appropriated by anyone, anytime to rally for a common cause that's in the benefit of humankind.—This means anyone can launch a new ideological message or campaign under the banner of ANONYMOUS.—Anyone can take up a leading role in the spreading of the ANON-consciousness.—Whether or not these appropriations are legitimate is decided by the rest of the internet citizenry.—If the majority of the public agrees with a proposed appropriation, then the public will act.—If the majority of the public disagrees with a proposed appropriation, then the public will protest and label the message in question as not legitimate and thus not representing the values of ANONYMOUS.—This makes ANONYMOUS the first really democratic institution in the world, necessarily being good by definition. (transcript of a YouTube video. <https://goo.gl/opONRo>)

This CICD is expressed through three phenomena that, when performed, reaffirm the self-definition of universality. These applications of universality are the ‘bat-signal’, the ‘franchise’, and Anonymous as a symbol for people that are not acting in the name of Anonymous.



## **‘Bat-signal’**

Anonymous does not only welcome newcomers who want to become Anonymous, sometimes the collective actively tries to enrol people outside of the Anonymous submerged network to join for time-limited actions. This is when Anonymous becomes a ‘bat-signal’<sup>14</sup> as it is called by some respondents: a group of Anons create an operation, sets up platforms of communication, publicises the matter with a YouTube video, Twitter posts, a press release, etc., and through these media invites any willing person to join.

During Chanology, for instance, diverse internet communities not specifically related to Anonymous (e.g., users from somethingawful.com, fark.com, and diverse videogames-related sites) joined the project. It is also particularly visible with swarm actions that involve from a few hundred to a few thousand participants, the most iconic example being the DDoS campaigns against financial institutions blocking funds to WikiLeaks in December 2010 during ‘Operation Avenge Assange’. This action peaked at a few thousand participants and included many individuals not a part of any internet community but who had heard of the operation through the mass media (Anon17).

The open nature of Anonymous operations is also practical for hackers whose team they belong to can be oblivious, unsympathetic, or hostile to Anonymous. Individual hackers can then participate independently: “members of other groups respond—and say, ‘yeah, we did it as Anonymous’—because it was not with their main group” (Anon11).

## **Franchise**

Anonymous as a ‘franchise’ means that Anonymous groups can recognise other groups even if they disagree on the existence of some CICDs and their expression, as long as they share other CICDs. This is the case, for instance, between Chanologists and Ubiquitous. Many Chanologists disagree with the use of illegal methods by some Ubiquitous, and sometimes consider that some Ubiquitous operations are not horizontal and democratic enough. Yet, they are usually still considered as Anonymous because they still share other CICDs such as fun and social change. There is a tolerant recognition of other Anons.

Tolerance also applies for groups that are not necessarily known by the submerged network, as long as they seem to share enough CICDs to be considered as Anon. There are strong advantages for groups signing Anonymous to be recognised as such by the rest of the submerged network.

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<sup>14</sup> The bat-signal is, in the Batman mythos, a distress signal device used by law enforcement to call Batman for help.

There is no defined authority that would rubberstamp an action as Anonymous in the name of the submerged network. Nevertheless, the use of the sign is partially controlled by the network through mechanisms of reverberation and denunciation: activist Anonymous largely relies on media coverage for its existence in that propaganda and raising awareness continuously pass through the media and also because fame provides Anonymous with stronger legitimacy and powers of intimidation. To be known (unless it is particularly spectacular or daring to directly attract the mass media), an operation needs its public announcement to be relayed in the social media sphere, especially within the Anonymous submerged network where it has the highest probability of being relayed (Twitter currently has an important role in this mechanism).

The first mechanism for reverberation is whether the collective action is actually expressing Anonymous CICDs, if the collective action has the necessary qualities to be considered as Anonymous. The second mechanism of recognition of a collective action as Anonymous by the rest of the submerged network is that of denunciation: if an action signed Anonymous shockingly violates a collective identity definition (e.g., the obvious presence of leaders) or if it breaches a taboo (e.g., the attack of news agencies or the threat of physical violence), the Anonymous social network will publicly say so, and it can sometimes be accompanied by intimidations, threats, and attempts at 'doxing'. Such a case occurred concerning a video published on YouTube in October 2012. The video used the usual Anonymous aesthetics (logo, masked man seated and reading a missive, synthesised voice), declaring that a bomb had been planted in US government buildings. The publishing was followed with several videos and dozens of Twitter posts denouncing the threat as non-Anonymous, strongly stating that the collective does not participate in terrorist activities.

To conclude, there is no authority in the submerged network that can assign the status of 'true' Anonymous to a collective action, but there is a relative control on which type of collective action can use the Anonymous sign through the manipulation of the subject's index authority, i.e. the number of references the operation obtains from other Anonymous entities.

### **Public symbol**

Finally, the sign Anonymous is often used outside of the Anonymous submerged network for actions that are not claimed as Anonymous. Anons are not at the origin of the phenomenon, nor do they necessarily like it. However, it reinforces the collective identity definition of universality because it shows that anyone can agree and use the 'idea' of Anonymous. Though statistics are not available, it can be said that Anonymous has become well known in other activist circles and is often recognized by these circles as a champion of free speech, anti-state surveillance, and human rights. One of the signifier of Anonymous, the Guy Fawkes mask, is appropriated by social

movements and political organisations that consider it as a general symbol of the fight against those who threaten free speech, privacy, and human rights. Trusting Wikipedia, the first instance a Guy Fawkes mask appeared in a non-Anonymous related situation was in 2009 during protests concerning the issue of British MP's expenses (BBC 2009). Since then, the mask has been seen in different protests, such as Occupy and during the Arab Spring. Polish members of parliament wore the Guy Fawkes mask to protest the vote of the ACTA anti-piracy treaty (Warman 2012) (see figure 26).



*Figure 26.* Polish members of parliament during the vote of the ACTA anti-piracy treaty, 2012.

This use of the Anonymous sign outside of the submerged network is a risk for commodification and loss of meaning, however. Anonymous' symbol has also gone outside the political field to enter the cultural scene, where its signified becomes more uncertain (from clear reference to the activist use to a vague notion of coolness). It is used in music videos (Romero 2012) and appears in Graffiti. It becomes a popular item to wear during Halloween and other masked festivities. It sells well in shops, somewhere between Captain America and Mickey Mouse. Tee shirts, caps and key chains are also by-products that you can buy on the internet (see Appendix 6). The Guy Fawkes mask comes back to its consumerist roots of movie by-product, but mostly known as the 'mask of Anonymous' with an added value of vague rebellious coolness.

#### 7.5.4. Conclusion

For many of the respondents, the idea that Anonymous has an identity seems absurd. It is absurd because Anonymous cannot be defined: it is too diverse, it is not fixed, it can potentially be everything, tackling any issue, using any means, accepting anyone, be anyone. The CICD of universality contains the

CICDs of inclusiveness and dynamic diversity. Inclusiveness means that anyone is welcome to be part of Anonymous. It is a founding principle of 4chan, aimed at the construction of the good community. The principle continued to be applied despite the fear for some Anons to see the Anonymous counterculture dissolved by an outpouring of new users on 4chan. Dynamic diversity is the idea that Anonymous can become anything, especially that it can touch upon any topic as long as the collective action has for goal fun and social change. Concerning activist actions, this idea was supported by two processes of ‘capillarisation’, where Anons jumped from one theme to another whether these themes be linked by a target (the initial reaction against the deed of one enemy becoming an operation against all of the enemy’s wrongs) or by newcomers who are attracted to protest against a target for other reasons than what the operation was initiated for. This is how Anonymous surpassed its first themes of actions based on parrhesia and defence of freedom of speech to develop towards the defence of human rights, the targeting of authoritarian regimes, and progressively everything related to social justice. Eventually, with the already diverse and numerous amounts of operations, the CICD of dynamic diversity emerged and legitimated activist actions that were far from Anonymous’ early countercultural values and practices.

This strong desire for universality is an issue when it comes to relationships with the public. The CICD of universality, which implies that Anonymous cannot be defined, is put into tension with the hero archetype that calls for a good public image, and thus in turn calls for the activist branches of Anonymous to present themselves. For self-presentation, press releases and spokespersons are two possibilities. When it comes to the first possibility, Anons usually agree that they cannot give a definition of the community other than that of universality. The question of the appointment of spokespersons faces the same tension, plus a contradiction with the ethics of horizontality and self-effacement before the possibility of the spokesperson gaining power and fame. In Project Chanology, the problem was solved by letting a trusted and charismatic figure interact with the media as a ‘not-quite-spokesperson’, answering the questions of journalists while underlining that he was not representing the movement. In Ubiquitous, after a period of uncertainty when several people were talking about Anonymous to the press with no consent from the community, several important operations implemented a policy of prohibition of any role of spokespersons. Journalists are handled within a channel in IRC servers, or communicated with the press by releases of texts written communally. Ubiquitous also used dedicated IRC channels to answer journalist’s question, as well as Prof. Gabriella Coleman as liaison.

Finally, universality is expressed and reaffirmed through the ‘Bat-signal’, a short-term inclusive tactic that calls different internet communities to join a

specific action. Universality is also expressed through what is sometimes called a ‘franchise’ system. Universality means the acceptance of groups bearing the Anonymous sign even if groups do not like one another (for instance AnonNet and AnonOps concerning means and organisation) or if they are not known in the submerged network, as long as they share some CICDs. Relative control of the use of the sign is still in place through the manipulation of the index authority of a collective action, i.e. the level of reverberation in electronic social networks and news networks. This reverberation is related to whether the operation is expressing Anonymous CICDs. Finally, and unwillingly from Anonymous, the symbol of the Guy Fawkes mask exceeded Anonymous with respect to its use as a signifier for activism, reinforcing by its existence the CICD of universality.

What does it say about the collective identity of Anonymous? First, universality and its two components (inclusiveness and dynamic diversity) are CICDs that concern shared characteristics of participants and emergent properties of the collective. The shared characteristics of participants are the fact that there are none: everyone has the potential to become Anonymous. All that is needed is the desire to participate. The emergent property of the collective is that it has the possibility to be anything.

Second, concerning the question of the origin of collective identity, inclusiveness was developed from the beginning of 4chan, as a conscious decision linked to the political project of the construction of the good community. Dynamic diversity appeared gradually, first at the same time as of the hero archetype, which opened Anonymous to full-activist actions, then during the development of Ubiquitous, when Anonymous opened its field of activist action to other themes than freedom of speech and information, and human rights.

Third, these CICDs are widely shared, but some criticisms exist and they come in tensions with other CICDs. Concerning inclusiveness, there is a fear that the Anonymous counterculture, the CICDs of offense and parrhesia, could be lost because of the complete acceptance of newcomers. Concerning dynamic diversity, there is a fear that the activist branch of Anonymous dissolves itself and loses power because of the multiplication of collective actions, entering in tension with the need for efficiency of the hero archetype. Universality also comes in tension with the need for efficiency of the hero in that it needs a good public image.

Fourth and last, concerning the question of the plurality or unity of collective identity, and on a meta level, universality is the CICD that permits the acceptance that all collective actions do not have to share all the CICDs presented above, because it accepts differences. Some Chanologists and Ubiquitous might not like each other well and might follow different CICDs, with different takes on the question of legality and organisation for instance, yet they accept each other as part of Anonymous because they share other

CICDs. Universality if responsible for the modularity of the collective identity of Anonymous, or its 'connective identity', as I explain in the general conclusion.

## 8. General conclusion: the connective identity of Anonymous

In the introduction of this thesis, Wittgenstein's (2010) thought experiment on the definition of the concept of 'game' was cited. All elements of the definition that we can produce, such as fun and competition are incomplete and we are left with the impossible task of defining characteristics that would encompass all the games imaginable. I likened this conundrum to the concept of Anonymous: we can attempt to define Anonymous as activist, hacker, or anything else, but eventually these categories cannot encompass all of what it is and all of what it does.

In the end of his investigation, Wittgenstein (2010) attempts to find the meaning of 'game':

[T]he result of this investigation is this: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing [...] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family.

We can understand Anonymous in the same manner as Wittgenstein's meaning of game: collective actions signed Anonymous form a 'family' linked by a network of similarities "overlapping and crisscrossing" (ibid.). These similarities are the CICDs and their expressions that have been studied. This thought is developed further in the present chapter. The first section summarises the findings and answers the research question. The second section focuses on the answers to the sub-questions. The third section discusses the results to the research question in relation to the literature on collective identity in digitally enabled social movement. The final section suggests some developments for future research.

What does it mean to use the name 'Anonymous'? The first aim of this work was to understand the centrifugal logic of Anonymous, that is the use of a collective name for seemingly unrelated actions carried out in an unsystematic fashion by different people. To this effect, I called upon the concept of collective identity. The notion had been used to explain how social movements insured their cohesion through the construction of shared definitions between their participants. Collective identity could explain the use of

a collective name if such use was referring to the expression of shared meanings. The nature and existence of collective identity in electronically enabled social movements had been discussed, and here we discovered the presence of contrasting opinions. This work could add knowledge to the debate.

I chose to base my work on the model of collective identity of Alberto Melucci because it had been developed from case studies similar to the structure of Anonymous. Within these case studies, the formation of collective actions is based on a large ‘submerged’ social network pervasive to everyday interactions. Melucci is a social constructivist and as such he believes that the dynamics of social movements can be understood through the study of communally constructed meanings. He divides his model of collective identity into three analytical concepts: collective identity is composed of a social network, personal emotional investment towards other participants, and CICDs, which are the shared ideas that define the social movement and which are constructed through the interactions of the participants within the social network.

However, in his analysis of the networks that performed activist actions, Melucci only studied the CICDs that were related to the actions themselves. He did so in order to differentiate it from the rest of the submerged network. Those definitions concern three characteristics of the activist action: its expected goals, its means, and its relationships with the environment. The CICDs can be complementary, co-dependent (one CICD needs the other), or antagonistic. The set of relationships between these CICDs is called an ‘action system’ by Melucci. This analytical concept shows that participants have the choice to express these CICDs differently, favouring some over others, and often trying to negotiate the presence of contradictory CICDs so that people with different opinions can keep working together. This negotiation, which is done through interpersonal interactions, permits the movement to retain its integrity and collective actions.

But for this work the identification of an action system is not enough. I am not interested in Anonymous simply as a purveyor of activist action, but as a whole. This whole consists of a submerged network that hosts a counterculture, where people converse daily, perform rituals, and participate in deviant behaviour. Additionally, there are other components than those of the action system that influences on the emergence of Anonymous collective actions, which pertain to its counterculture, its organisation, its use of anonymity, and its universality.

As a result, Anonymous users (those who act in the name of Anonymous or who consider themselves a part of the Anonymous collective) define Anonymous in other ways than the CICDs contained in the action system of their activist actions. Identifying these CICDs would help in understanding what links the diverse collective actions performed by Anonymous so that they legitimate the use of the same collective name.

To this end, I conducted a three-year ethnographic study using the methods of participant observations in IRC servers, interviews, analysis of web



forum discussions and cultural artefacts, and respondent feedback. A summary of the findings is presented that follows the structure of the analytical chapter, each part presenting a set of CICDs.

## 8.1. Summary of findings

What is the collective identity of Anonymous? It is a web of meanings, a system that contains five sets of collective identity definitions and their relationships with one another. Anonymous is first a counterculture remarkable by its deviant practices of offense and parrhesia that are performed by self-designated misfits. The liberal takes on moderation (i.e. level of censorship) by the administrative team of the image board 4chan (the birthplace of Anonymous) led to the development of a self-defining aesthetics of shock-value, with the publishing of pornography, gore, intentionally offensive and anti-politically correct macros and statements (sexist, racist...), insulting and abusing speech, and flaming and trolling behaviour. Next to offense is the practice of parrhesia, which is the expression of inconvenient truths with no concern for shocking and hurting. They can relate to oneself or the external world. Both offending and parrhesiastic practices are breaches of the 'mainstream' lifeworld system of the outer society, the set of rules that permits interpersonal communications that relies on commonly understood code of conduct such as politeness, propriety, respect for others, and what is commonly understood as the 'politically correct'. 4chan and other related platforms constructed an alternative lifeworld system that relied on the normalisation of parrhesia and offense. They were deemed important as psychological support for the participants in that they brought catharsis and fun. Both of them became collective identity definitions of the submerged network formed around 4chan because they could not be expressed in many other places.

The second set of collective identity definitions relates to the action system that opposes two archetypes that personify Anonymous, the trickster and the hero. Early on, anonymous discussions and collective actions gave the participants the impression of the emergence of an entity with a life of its own: it was called the 'Anonymous hivemind'. One face of the hivemind was its personification as a trickster figure, which looks for the 'lulz', the achievement of fun at the expense of others, oblivious to or appreciating the pain it can inflict. This trickster part of Anonymous performed collective pranks aimed at individuals, internet communities, and private organisations. These pranks are the externalisation (targeting outside of the submerged network) of offense and parrhesia. With the identification of external targets, Anonymous translates parrhesia into a goal for conflictual actions, aiming to reveal the truth of a person, an organisation, or a situation. It often aims at undermining its symbolic resources (i.e. its popularity or public image) by

ridiculing it. Pranks keep system-breaching qualities on the level of the life-world with the use of offense and on the social and socio-technical level by an improper relation with the target and the subversive use of technological means. By doing so, Anonymous' pranks are becoming close to the activist type of collective action underlined by Melucci: conflictual relation with an external entity, breaching the limits of compatibility of the system while doing so, and a sense of solidarity between participants, the sense of acting as a group.

The campaign called Project Chanology, which began like any other prank in 2008, was a reaction against a violation of the principle of freedom of information that the CoS perpetrated when it tried to censor a YouTube video. Chanology had the same characteristics to those of previous pranks: a sense of solidarity, system-breaching through the use of unconventional means, a conflict against a clear target. What made Chanology different from previous collective actions was its lifespan: while pranks were usually lasting for a few days or a few weeks, Chanology lasted for months. This extension permitted Anonymous to "identify the stakes" (Melucci 1996, 32) of the conflict they had created, i.e. that the CoS was a serious threat against freedom of speech and human dignity, and that Anonymous had the power to undermine the Church, especially its public image. From this identification of the stakes, some Anons began to consider Project Chanology as an action for social change and Anonymous as a potential social movement.

Anonymous did not 'leap' from malicious prankster to rightful activists *deus ex machina*. Pranks were already near-activist types of collective actions as stated above, and Chanology became a full activist type because the CoS offered a target worthy of sustained attacks and of a long-term campaign, which permitted to identify the stakes of the conflict against the CoS and to realise the possibilities of change. Alongside this shift to full activism, the emergence of the CICD of Anonymous as striving for social change came into existence.

The emergence of activism as a collective identity definition and of Anonymous as a group acting for social justice and change implied that collective actions would be different in terms of goals, means, and relationships with the environment as compared with previous pranks. In this work, the constructed personification of Anonymous striving for social justice is called the 'hero' archetype in the sense of 'defender of the oppressed'. To fulfil its goal, the hero can be more efficient if it benefits from a good public image, producing a 'good vs. evil' narrative during conflictual actions. To this aim, it should avoid using means that can be construed as immoral by the public. The trickster, by contrast, produces fun through immoral acts and does not care about its public image, except for the fact that it is gladly seen as ruthless and potentially cruel.

These two orientations led to the construction of a multipolar action system, a set of relationships between CICDs concerning goals, means, and environment, which offered different options for the Anonymous collective

on which CICDs to express and favour. From then on, Anonymous collective actions and campaigns would have to define themselves within the parameters of this action system so that people accept to work together, finding the balance between the will for fun and the will for social change, choosing the means in accordance with the importance given to public image. Most collective actions would take hybrid forms with differing positions between the two poles, performed by a trickster-hero persona well symbolised by its newly constructed signifier, the Guy Fawkes mask.

The third set of CICDs concerns its organisation and decision-making processes (DMPs). First, Anonymous is equated with a horizontal type organisation. Hierarchy and representation should not exist. Anonymous is a 'herd of cats': users are impossible to lead and won't follow any orders. This personal autonomy renders Anonymous similar to a 'flock of birds', an expression that underlines the heterogeneity and unpredictability of the movement. Types of organisation within Anonymous are many, from small affinity groups to mass, 'swarm' actions, but they are all constructed around the principle of self-management and personal autonomy. Anons are also attached to participatory democratic types of DMP, including lengthy debates, direct vote, consensus, and the use of anonymity for the achievement of a rational discourse.

Although the CICDs concerning organisation are universally accepted within the Anonymous submerged network, they are in constant tension with actual practices. Collective actions that react to a sudden event are subjected to what Milan (2013a) calls the "dictatorship of action" (94), where the most active people are the ones who decide and the other users just 'hop on' collective actions without discussing their modalities, particularly in 'stand-alone complex' types of collective action where actors do not interact with one another. The refusal of structure, hierarchy, and role specialisation can also end up in a "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman 1972) with the apparition of hidden cliques of influence. With the progressive adoption of pseudonymity, types of charismatic authority typical to internet communities (O'Neil 2009, ch. 2) emerged that were based on techno-social privileges, skills, and popularity.

The reaffirmation of the norms of horizontality and democracy against the practices takes 'voice' mechanisms, where Anons' open forum threads publicly rant against 'leaderfags', warn the community that it is taking a wrong path, or criticise other Anons openly in forums and IRC channels. Reaffirmation can also take 'exit' and 'fork' mechanisms in which Anons refuse to participate in collective actions that are not expressing the CICDs of horizontality and democracy, and sometimes create their own alternative collective action.

The fourth set of collective identity definitions is related to anonymity. Anonymity constitutes two functions in Anonymous: individual and group protection, building of the good community. 4chan is a project, an experiment in openness, inclusion (everyone is free to post), freedom of speech,

and fruitful discussions. To post anonymously is to participate to this project because the lack of authorship serves the purpose of leaving egos behind and letting ideas speak for themselves. The same goes for those refusing means of individual recognition during collective actions, so that there would be no emergence of leadership or authority. Practicing anonymity becomes the expression of an ethics of self-effacement, which defines the user as an Anonymous participant. By being Anonymous, users become good citizens, sacrificing possible recognition for the construction of the good community: horizontal, democratic, and permitting rational discourse. They are also considered as being balanced persons who, contrary to 'namefags' and 'fame-fags', do not need validation or appraisal for their posts. The virtue of self-effacement is also expressed through 'leaderlessness': by refusing to take or accept power and influence, the virtuous Anon insures the continuance of an egalitarian and democratic organisation by sacrificing the potential enjoyment of power. They are also considered balanced for not striving towards selfish and corruptive power. Self-effacement, the decision to not brag and lead, defines the true Anonymous participant. Self-effacement is considered either as a virtue, a natural quality of the individual, or as an active construction of the individual by herself through the subjection to a set of behaviour-transformative norms willingly chosen.

The fifth and last set of collective identity definitions is related to universality. For Anonymous users, talking of a collective identity can seem absurd: Anonymous is too diverse, changing, and inclusive to have an identity. It does not have to be circumscribed to a peculiar field or type of behaviour. On the contrary, Anonymous becomes whatever it wants to. It can potentially be anything (except for some critical CICDs that need to stay, in the opinion of some Anons). This claim of non-identity, or universality as I call it, is a collective identity definition in itself. The self-definition of inclusiveness (to accept everyone) was present at the start of 4chan, which had the founding (and basic) principle to be open to all. Diversity and change emerged progressively and dialectically with the diversification of Anonymous campaigns after project Chanology. Already, Anonymous' countercultural roots of the search for fun, parrhesia, and freedom of speech opened a wide range of options and incentives for collective action. The development of new goals and tactics was helped by two processes of 'capillarisation'. First, the exposure to an enemy that had been targeted for one reason could end up with the discovery of other misdeeds it had done, and other organisations committing the same misdeeds would be targeted later on. The second mechanism was the practice of inclusiveness itself: when newcomers arrived at an operation, they brought with them their own goals that could be transferred to the movement if these were shared with a sufficient number of participants.

One component of universality, the definition that Anonymous is 'an idea' in the sense that the sign Anonymous does not belong to one group in particular, is expressed by the acceptance by Anons that others wear the

Anonymous banner even if they disagree with their actions or some other characteristics, as long as they share other CICDs. A form of informal recognition exists through the manipulation of the index authority of collective actions by the rest of the submerged network, i.e. how much, positively or negatively, the subject is referred to within the electronic platforms of communication of the Anonymous submerged network. Another expression of universality is the common call for participation or ‘bat-signal’ of Anonymous that nominates a target, designs a plan, and welcomes anyone to join. Finally, and involuntarily, the Anonymous sign was taken by political actors outside of the submerged network. These actors wore the Guy Fawkes Mask as a symbol for the fight against oppression and for freedom of speech. Such phenomenon reinforces the CICD that Anonymous is an idea.

## 8.2. Answers to the sub-questions

Answers related to the debates concerning the origins of collective identity and whether collective identity is stable or dynamic are presented here. The question concerning the singularity or plurality of collective identity is presented in the next section.

Concerning the origin of collective identity: In Anonymous, CICDs are constructed from interactions between participants, for instance through discussions, not necessarily referring to the definition of Anonymous, but also concerning the specifics of what to plan for and actually carry out during actions. Individual and collective actions, which express CICDs and therefore reinforce their legitimacy, participate in the collective identity construction process as well. Self-definitions can first be imported by newcomers bringing with them their own visions of Anonymous and what it represents to them. These ideas can be offered to the collective and eventually become CICDs if they prove popular among the participants. During Chanology, newcomers had come to Anonymous because they considered it a movement for social change, and as a result reinforced the hero configuration of the action system.

Some CICDs in Anonymous refer to individual traits, like the experiences leading to a status of misfit; some are related to what it is to act as Anon, the “shared experience of the action” (Milan 2013b, 201), like the various practices of offense and parrhesia, of anonymity, and leaderlessness. Finally, some are emergent properties of the movement, like the horizontal organisation and the CICDs related to the action system and the archetypes that represent its poles.

Concerning the stability of collective identity: First, collective identity is cemented by emotional links between participants, and between participants and the collective as a whole. In the submerged network and during collective actions, participants weave friendships that contribute to the develop-

ment of personal feelings of community. The knowledge of sharing the same emotions during a collective action—fun, thrill and excitement for instance—contributes to this feeling of community, permitting Anons to recognise themselves into one another. Anons can also feel an ‘oceanic feeling’, a direct attachment to the collective as a whole during collective actions.

Second, all CICDs presented in this work have been formed before or during Project Chanology, so at the time of writing they are between 8 and 13 years old. But their ability to last is the result of permanent acts of reaffirmation from Anons. CICDs are vulnerable. Those within the action system are in competition with one another and can potentially be expelled in favour of their antagonists. Other tensions exist, for instance, between offense and inclusivity, with the fear of losing Anonymous’ counterculture due to the arrival of too many newcomers, the hero archetype and universality, when activist efficiency asks for self-definition toward the outside while universality does not accept a stable self-definition, and when activist efficiency asks for spokespersons while horizontality and self-effacement forbids specialisation of work, representation and celebrity.

Other CICDs are threatened by the actual practices during collective action that contradict them. To exist, their reaffirmation is done through Anons who express them through practice, debate on how to fix their possible lack of expression, publicly accuse other Anons that are allegedly betraying these CICDs, refuse to participate in collective actions that do not express the CICDs they think are important, and create alternative collective actions that will express them better.

Finally, the main finding of this work, which concerns the plurality of collective identity, is that Anonymous’ collective identity can be regarded as modular. This is explained in the next section.

### 8.3. The connective identity of Anonymous and its relation to other models of collective identity

Not all groups and individuals that reclaim themselves as Anonymous recognise all of the CICDs that have been described in this work, nor do all collective actions that are signed Anonymous express them all. But all accept and express a number of them that is sufficient to legitimate their own belonging to the movement and to be recognised most of the time by other Anons as such. The collective identity of Anonymous can be considered as ‘modular’: participants are attached to Anonymous in different ways and understand it differently. But the meaning of Anonymous is not atomised either because it is made of determinate definitions that individuals came to meet in videos, blogs, cultural artefacts, forums discussions, and conversations with other users, all that is part of Milan (2015) conception of the

‘cloud’, the symbolic space of electronic platforms that is a repository of symbolic resources for activists and collective identity definitions. Some participants have been attracted to the movement because one of these definitions happen to fit in with part of their own personal identity: some have met CICDs during collective action and adopted them while others have rejected other CICDs or have never met them. Individuals do not construct their own definition of Anonymous from scratch; rather, they adopt or reject a limited number of CICDs already existing in the cloud, but they also express or reaffirm them. They can also modify or create new ones by interacting with other Anons.

The CICDs are not unrelated to one another and indeed many have emerged together and grown, for instance those that constitute one polar archetype of the action system. Their adoptions by individuals and their expressions in collective actions overlap one another. Anons and Anonymous collective actions are therefore symbolically linked by a web of collective identity definitions. This web of meanings permits the Anonymous collective to perform a strongly heterogeneous set of collective actions while at the same time retaining a sense of common identity, which legitimates the use of the same collective name. The centrifugal logic of Anonymous is enabled by the modularity and network form of its collective identity (tentatively called ‘connective identity’). The next paragraphs discuss this form of collective identity in relation to the current literature on collective identity in digitally enabled social movements. Focus is on four authors who recently developed a theoretical model: McDonald, Milan, and Bennett and Segerberg.

First, it is not easy to compare these authors since they have very different conceptions of what collective identity entails. McDonald (2001, 2002, 2004, 2015) equates collective identity with stability, homogeneous ideologies and organisations, leadership, and imposition of frames of understanding by a central power. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) are often cited when it comes to discuss collective identity (Bakardjieva 2015), but these authors reject the claim that it is what they are concerned with (private conversation with Dr. Segerberg). The *quid pro quo* originates from the fact that they once used the term “collective identity framing” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 750) in conjunction with the concept of “collective action frames” (ibid., 742, 747, 750), both being components of a “logic of collective action” (758). This “logic of collective action” is similar to McDonald’s definition of collective identity and how it is linked with other characteristics of a social movement such as a centralised organisation and the imposition of frames from circles of leadership.

Milan (2013a, b), by contrast, bases her work on Melucci, and therefore shares the social constructivist view on collective identity that sees that collective identity definitions as constructed by the whole of a movement through daily interactions. Therefore, it would be mistaken to confront the conclusions of the different authors without knowing that they understand

the concept of collective identity differently. With their own concept of collective identity, the conclusions of these authors are the act of disappearance of collective identity for McDonald (2001), its expandability or individualisation for Bennett and Segerberg (2012) and its existence and usefulness for Milan (2015) and the present author.

Once we understand the meaning of collective identity for each author, the present results can be compared. To McDonald and Bennett and Segerberg's credit, the imposition of a homogeneous set of collective identity frames by a few key people or a deciding group for the rest of the movement is not seen in Anonymous, nor is it usually seen in digitally enabled social movements. Finally, it is not present in network-organised movements such as the global justice movement (Della Porta 2005, Flesher Fominaya 2010a).

McDonald sees the disappearance of collective identity concomitant with the rise of what he calls "experience movement" (McDonald 2004, 575) in his study of the global justice movement, the QiQong movement (*ibid.*), and Anonymous (McDonald 2015). Milan borrowed the concept of experience movement and interprets its components as CICDs in her study of hacktivist movements (Milan 2013a, 71). She subsequently understood Anonymous as bearing the same collective identity components (Milan 2013b).

For McDonald (2004), experience movements rely on the motivation of activists to see "oneself as another" (575), to be recognised as a particular individual and see the resemblances and differences with other people. It is not an 'I' who encounters a constructed 'we' (this encounter is McDonald's understanding of collective identity), but an 'I' meeting other 'Is'. The importance of affinity groups in the global justice movement demonstrates the importance of direct relationships between individuals, without the recourse to an abstract totality (the 'we', the definition of a movement).

Inspired by McDonald, Milan considers that the collective identity of hacktivist movements (or what she refers to as 'radical techies') centres on the shared "experience of the action" (Milan 2013b, 201). The emphasis on individual experience to define the movement comes from the fact that hacktivists share an individualistic culture, and that their technical expertise is owned at the individual level, so that activist actions are performed individually, in direct relationship between the individual and the machine. Milan borrows McDonald's formula to say that the collective identity of radical techies is not about the relationship to an 'I' with the 'we', but to an 'I' with other 'Is' in the shared experience of the action.

The current results show that Anonymous shares with radical techies this type of collective identity that is the shared experience of the action, such as the practice of offense, of parrhesia, of autonomy, of anonymity, and the emotions felt during collective actions. But the collective identity of Anonymous is also the relation of and 'I' with a 'we', of the attachment of the individual with the emerging properties of the collective, such as the trickster and hero archetypes, the hivemind, the modes of organisation and DMPs, and the will for universality. In addition, many Anons care about the



meaning of Anonymous, how it is applied by other Anons, and how it is perceived from the outside.

Connective identity is founded on the structure of “cloud protesting” (Milan 2015, 2), where electronic platforms of communications are the substrate for the process of collective identity construction, offering always-on, instantaneously available spaces for discussions, and implanted into the user’s everyday life. These platforms also permit easy access to CICDs as they “store a set of ‘ingredients’ that make joint action possible, such as meanings, identities, narratives, experience-based knowledge and solidarity networks” (Milan 2014, 894). Stored CICDs can be discovered and chosen to create collective actions that will be attached to the larger movement through the sharing of the CICDs chosen, becoming part of the web of meaning that composes connective identity.

Finally, the collective identity of Anonymous stands between two views of CI: molar (homogeneous) and molecular (individualised). Both visions of collective identity as imposed from a centre to the periphery or created from grassroots interactions usually imply the idea that the collective identity components (or ‘frames’) apply homogeneously to the whole social movement. The “personal action frames” of Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 743) mean that each participant can have a different interpretation of the collective actions she is participating in, as long as it is in accord with a general and fuzzy master frame. Between these molar and molecular configurations that are collective identity and connective action, Anonymous places itself in a middle position, of what can be called a ‘connective identity’ in which collective identity definitions are determined and stable, but where one does not need to recognise them all to feel part of a movement and reclaim oneself as such.

## 8.4. Developments for future research

The results provided by this work open possibilities for quantification and expansion. The ethnographic method permits identification of collective identity definitions and their expressions during collective action. It can give an approximation of the frequency of the embracement of collective identity definitions within the submerged network. For instance, trickster and hero figures combined cover all of Anonymous collective actions; the subculture of offense is always present where the trickster is, and it is also present in many collective actions that have a hero configuration. The ethics of self-effacement is usually found in its full application with Anons that are the most dedicated to the movement. A quantification of these frequencies, i.e. to get to know how many individuals recognise themselves in each CICD, could be useful to understand the dynamics of Anonymous, its evolution, and the relationships between groups within the submerged network and

between the CICDs themselves. Anonymous users have already submitted themselves to internal surveys (surveys done by other Anonymous participants), but succeeding in finding a large number of respondents for an academic work could be difficult because of the propensity of some Anons to troll journalists and researchers. A more promising method is quantitative text analysis. With an extracted corpus of forum threads and chat logs (though the ethicality of their use remains a topic of discussion), the student of Anonymous, helped with software, could identify key discursive formulas corresponding to different collective identity definitions, analyse their relationship, and quantify them.

The research can also be expanded to other parts of the Anonymous submerged network not studied here. I focused on the main nodes of the English speaking submerged network, but research can be conducted in other linguistic area, and in other groups such as offline Anonymous circles.

Finally, some themes are worthy of development. First, Anonymous can be situated in the wave of social movements that reject any ideological identification. It is not surprising that, faithful to its universalist stance, Anonymous refuses all ‘-isms’. What is remarkable is that it autonomously developed a set of practices similar to the anarchist movement, which constructed it in a span of two hundred years. This set is composed of the “propaganda of the deed” (many campaigns are direct actions aimed to raise the awareness of the public on a political issue through spectacular moves); the creation of autonomous zones where new rules are experimented; the will for a flat organisation and participatory democracy; and distrust and aggressive behaviour of all ‘arbohic’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) (hierarchical) structures related to the care for personal freedom.

Second, the ethics of self-effacement is, in the current Western culture, peculiar, one could even say deviant. It needs to be researched more thoroughly and we need to know the motivations of those expressing it, their background, and if such ethics exist elsewhere than in the Anonymous culture. I propose the hypothesis that Anonymous is for some users the expression of a reaction against a pervasive culture of narcissism. According to Twenge and Campbell (2009, 2), narcissistic traits in the North American population have increased with an accelerating trend since the 1970s. These authors talk of a current narcissistic culture that puts fame, beauty, and money on a pedestal, and that encourages its population to admire themselves, to feel special, and entitled. It is a culture where one can hire fake paparazzi to feel famous for a day; where Paris Hilton is famous for being famous; where reality shows are numerous and popular; and where children shows proclaim “you’re special just for being you” (ibid., 101). The internet is a platform for narcissism promotion as well. Facebook shows an arms race to proof of success in which users try to show exclusively to others the best parts of their life and relinquishing the rest, and as a result, increasing ill-feelings and risks of depression for their audience (Moreno et al. 2011, Jelenchick,

Eickhoff, and Moreno 2013). The majority of blogs aims for self-expression and attention seeking (Twenge and Campbell 2009, 117); and online discussion forums favour “superficial exchanges instead of meaningful conversations” (ibid., 111). The reason for the flight of users from some digital communities like Something Awful to 4chan had to do with the fatigue of seeing discussions that were created more for vanity than for content creation. Practices of anonymity and leaderlessness countervail self-display and narcissistic inclinations: to bear the ethics of self-effacement is possibly a resistance against these hegemonic cultural traits:

<Anon17> i think the ethics [of self-effacement] were always there—just look at American history— those who wrote the federalists papers wrote it anonymously— the tea partiers were anon and hid their identity—but the society we live in today forces it out of us—its identity obsessed—why you got SJWs [i.e. social justice warriors, derogatory term] everywhere going nuts [within Anonymous], they cant tolerate people making a difference between persona, ego and the self—anon can—those people are from the tumblr [web 2.0 platform] generation where putting your name everywhere might get you a job—a lot of us [Anons] were from the time where making handles and persona was the norm [on the internet]

To understand better what is at play in this resistance of Anonymous against the current form of self-expression in our society, a genealogy on the ethics of self-effacement should be conducted. Research on the topic is scarce; only Gerson (2006) provides a brief presentation in his study of public discourses that praise modesty in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. In antiquity, the stoics considered modesty a virtue related to moderation, which in turn led to a state of happiness. The Romans used modesty as a rhetoric of self-presentation that could not only be instrumental but also “reflect an aptitude for civic and social intercourse” (185). The Christian conception of humility concerned the recognition of man’s sinful nature and the need to submit himself before God. The 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of a concept of modesty related to the *us et coutumes* of the royal court in which modest self-presentation reflected a virtue and good trait of character creating social equilibrium. Parisian nobles of the robe and bourgeois adopted this practice to base their primacy on their manners rather than on birth. During the French revolution, modesty became a republican virtue as a show of subordination of the self before the public good. Finally, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse on modesty became a means to make “socially acceptable and conceptually pleasing” (182) the societal process of individuation.

Well-designed studies are needed to answer questions related to the ethics of self-effacement and their practices, as well as to shed light on their present situation: How were they described and legitimised through the ages? Under which circumstances are they considered as intrinsic qualities or as processes of construction of the self? How does power influence their devel-

opment? What kinds of social systems do they support? Do they repress emergent behaviour, or are they means of resistance? Are they symptoms of new configurations of power or of new cultural systems? What are the possible influences and co-evolutions between the different regimes of thought related to them? Melucci was presenting social movements as “prophets of the present”:

They announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear. The inertia of the old categories may prevent us from hearing the message and from deciding, consciously and responsibly, what action to take in light of it. [...] They announce the commencement of change; not, however, a change in the distant future but one that is already a presence. (Melucci 1995, 1)

The practice of anonymity, among other Anonymous practices, could indeed be the manifestation of phenomena that have not been identified yet. Doing a 'history of the present', as Foucault defines genealogy, can construct a solid ground for the analysis of what Anonymous possibly is and stands for: a harbinger of the shape of things to come.

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# Appendix

## 1. Guidelines for a Twitter storm

Introduction to #OpLastResort-TwitterStorm!

You have been selected to assist this important Operation because we're pretty sure you know how to cut and paste. #OpLastResort is a long-term Op devoted to honoring the memory of Aaron Swartz and continuing his important work. Anonymous has prepared content that they would like shared with the world, and it's up to us to make sure it goes everywhere. Other Operatives will be spreading the news to major MSM outlets, YouTube, Facebook, and other websites while you participate in the push to bypass the bias and get the word out directly to the people via Twitter.

BEGIN THE MESSAGE OF ATTACK on January 25th at 11:59 PM EST

DON'T STOP UNTIL THERE IS CHANGE OR CHAOS!

1. Your LRTS Operator Number will be FOUR double digit random numbers from here - <http://www.randomnumbergenerator.com/>

example: I randomly rolled a 22 and then a 69 so I will be Operator "LRTS2269" today.

2. sign up for your first LRTS email account at [hush.com](http://hush.com) using "01" after LRTS and your number.

ex: [LRTS226901@hush.com](mailto:LRTS226901@hush.com)

3. sign up for a new Account Name at <https://Twitter.com> same as email

4. Fill out your profile as follows:

Profile Name: Aaron Swartz

Photo: <http://imgur.com/a/F8WHz>

Background: <http://imgur.com/a/kJcRX>

Location: RIP

Website: <http://pastebin.com/d2nvt263> (this pastebin)

Bio: Founder of Demand Progress, which launched the campaign against the internet censorship bills SOPA & PIPA #ExpectUs2013

4. Follow @OpLastResort & @LRTS000000  
(<https://Twitter.com/OpLastResort> &  
<https://Twitter.com/LRTS000000/followers>) so other LRTS members can retweet you.

5. Copy paste any hashtag that is currently trending into your first tweet (Example Trend Tools <http://whatthetrend.com> <http://www.twendr.com> <http://trendsmap.com/> or <http://Twitter.com>)

ex: #JustinBieber #Top10GreatestVoices or #ToMyFutureKids

6. \*\*\*INFOWARHEAD STEP\*\*\*

copy paste an #InfoWarheads #OpLastResort-Propaganda

#OpLastResort Authentication <http://youtu.be/egsmTsBkRaQ?t=30s>

ex: #OpLastResort Authentication <http://youtu.be/egsmTsBkRaQ?t=30s>  
#JustinBieber

ex: #OpLastResort Authentication <http://youtu.be/egsmTsBkRaQ?t=30s>  
#Top10Voices

ex: #OpLastResort Authentication <http://youtu.be/egsmTsBkRaQ?t=30s>  
#ToMyKids

7. Tweet it then repeat steps 4 & 5 with nine more trending hashtags.

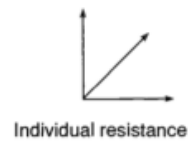
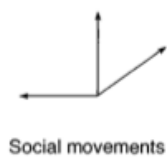
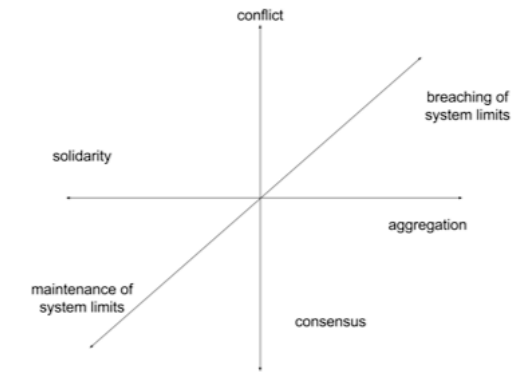
8. Next open <https://Twitter.com/LRTS000000/following> then retweet 10 tweets of 10 other active LRTS member for 100 retweets total.

ex: [Twitter.com/LRTS852401](https://Twitter.com/LRTS852401) & [Twitter.com/LRTS278303](https://Twitter.com/LRTS278303) & [Twitter.com/LRTS316210](https://Twitter.com/LRTS316210)

10. If spam filters ban your account just restart at step 2 with "02" at the end instead of "01" and continue sequentially but keep your original LRTS Operator Number for organization. Otherwise restart at step 5 and continue as long as you can.

ex: [@LRTS226902@hush.com](https://twitter.com/LRTS226902) then [@LRTS226903@hush.com](https://twitter.com/LRTS226903) then [@LRTS226904@hush.com](https://twitter.com/LRTS226904)

## 2. The eight types of collective action for Alberto Melucci



### 3. Consent form

1. *Purpose.* This interview aims to help me better understand the Anonymous movement, which is the topic of my doctoral dissertation. You can see my profile here: <https://mp.uu.se/web/profilsidor/start/-/emp/N10-2070>

2. *Anonymity.* The nickname of the interviewee will ever only be known of the interviewer. The interviewer will never, under any condition, disclose the nickname of the interviewee, to anyone. In published and unpublished works of the interviewer, the nickname of the interviewee will be changed in order to insure anonymity.

3. *Property and access.* The interview will be logged and kept as digital texts. The interviewer's copy of these logs will be considered his property. As such he will have the right to publish the interview or parts of it. The interviewee will however be able to ask for a censoring of the text if a threat to his integrity arises. For security reasons I will not share the texts to anyone; academics that wants to read the documents will have to read it from my computer and in my presence to avoid duplication of the files.

4. *Right to participate and withdraw.* Participation in the interview is voluntary, and participants are free to participate or not participate, as well as to withdraw from the process, without prejudice to them.

### 4. Interview Plan

-Any questions before we begin?

First contact

-how did you get to know anonymous? (if 4chan: how was it; how did it feel to be on 4chan?)

-Was there a particular reason you came?

-How was the "welcoming" on IRC?

- What did you begin to do?

Goals/Reasons

-For you, what should be the main point of Anonymous?

-Which operations did you like?

-can you tell me how you feel when you are in an operation?

Means

- Do you think there are techniques/tactics that are most effective than others for Anon to reach its goal?

Environment

-Have you seen other people/organisation helping Anonymous sometimes?

-What do you think of the media when they talk about Anonymous?

- Do you think there is anything that hinders the potential of Anonymous?

-What's the biggest threat to Anonymous?

#### Organisation

-What are the platforms you use the most?

-How do people meet to perform an operation?

-From your experience, how do people manage to take decisions with each other? What is the process?

#### Relationships

-Did you make friends or acquaintances here?

-how are the relationships between Anons?

#### Collective identity (if needed; probing)

-What do you think you share with other Anons here?

-Would you say Anon is an idea? A community?

-Do you think there are different types of Anons in terms of skills / in terms of favoured actions / in terms of value ?

-What does anonymity mean for you?

- What do you think of Anons that have been arrested?

#### Personal

-Do you think Anonymous has changed who you are, what you think you are?

-How much of your life does it take?

-Interest in how people relate themselves to Anonymous. Would you say you ARE anonymous, or a member of Anonymous, ?

-Did you tell some friends you were doing things in Anon?

-Tell me if some questions are going too far: Before Anonymous did you do some kind of activism?

-In the end, what would you like the Anon movement achieve?

#### Closing

Anything you would like to bring up, or ask about ?

What did you think of the interview?

## 5. Finding Anonymous



When you were born, they all loved you unconditionally, their instincts made them protect and care for you...



You can remember parts of early childhood, the memories are mostly happy...



But then she started abandoning you at that place...



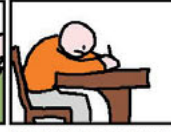
You didn't understand why but the people there were mean and scary, and they hated you without reason...



Even though it took away your childhood, you pull through, and you go forward, hoping that high school will be better...



But when you get there, it's much worse, and people are even more hateful and judgemental than before...



You do your best to keep a low profile, and keep up with the increasing payload of work...



After what seems like a lifetime you make it out, with good enough grades to go to a good college...



When you get there you realize you have yet again been let down, the people (if you can even call them people) here are even worse than before...



They exclude you even more, forcing you to spend your time in solitude. But by this point, you have come to rely on solitude as a form of protection...



But there is one good thing about college, you see a girl that you like...



Your parents' endless hickering and fighting no longer bothers you, you spend your time surfing the net or playing games...



Eventually, you pluck up the courage to tell her how you feel, and incredibly, she says she feels the same way...



The time you spend together is the happiest you can remember, everything is perfect, and you love her more and more each day...



Without the slightest warning or reason, she lets some thug idiot fuck her, completely disregarding your feelings and sending you into an emotional nose dive...



The feeling of loss and sadness festers, and quickly turns to anger, which in turn, morphs into a deep-seated hatred of anything you can find a reason to hate. You become even more antisocial and bottled up than before...



After what seems like a lifetime, university calls, and you move out of your abusive parents' house...



You lie awake at night, alone, regretting past decisions, blaming yourself (despite doing everything they told you) for the way your life has turned out...



You spend your days studying furiously, without any true goal or ambition, just because you have no other reason to wake up, and at weekends you work a dead end job to pay the rent...



Every day that goes by you curse them for telling you to work hard and try your best, to be patient and you would come out on top. You curse yourself for having trusted society...



Then, while browsing the internet one night, you stumble upon a website...



The people here are just like you, they understand you, they have been through what you're going through. All of the misfits, all of the sociopaths, all of the rejects, all of the betrayed, hurt hopeless bastards congregate here...



Through them you learn to laugh, to mock the people who brought you down and ground your face in the dust. You learn to shug off the most horrible things by simply joking about them.



When you get home you can tell them about your day, and they will laugh with you. You don't need friends, you don't need love and affection, and most importantly, you don't have to feel alone anymore...

We may not be your personal army...  
But we will always be your /b/rothers.

ty gaiz...ty





The four-leaf clover is the logo of 4chan.



## 6. The commodification of Anonymous



Anonymous Porte-clés  
3,65 €



Anonywear Porte-clés  
3,45 €



Keychain anonyme porte-clés  
3,60 €



NOUS SOMMES ANONYMES T-SHIRTS  
23,95 €

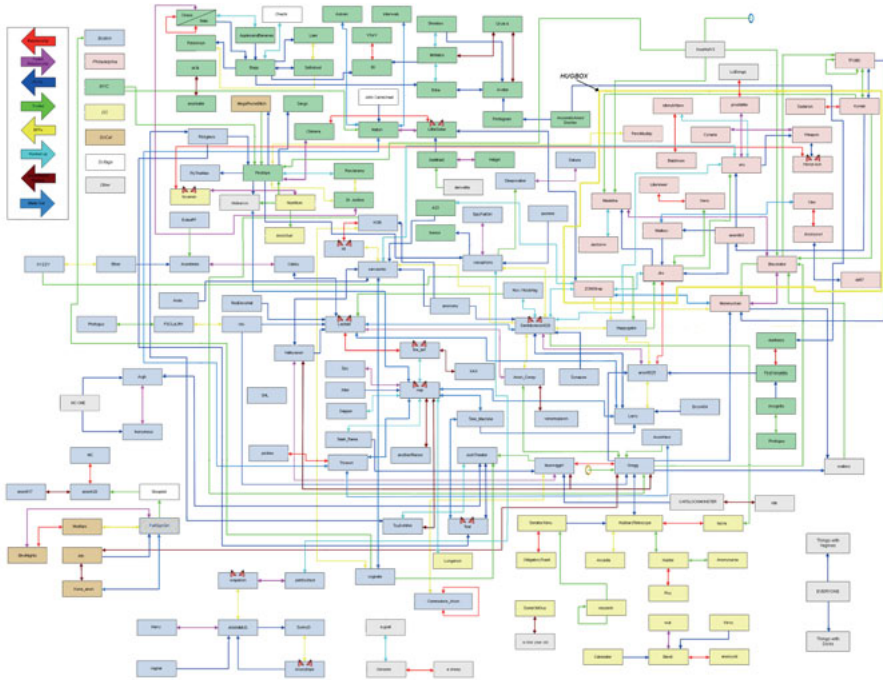


ANONYMOUS? (Black) シャツ  
23,95 €



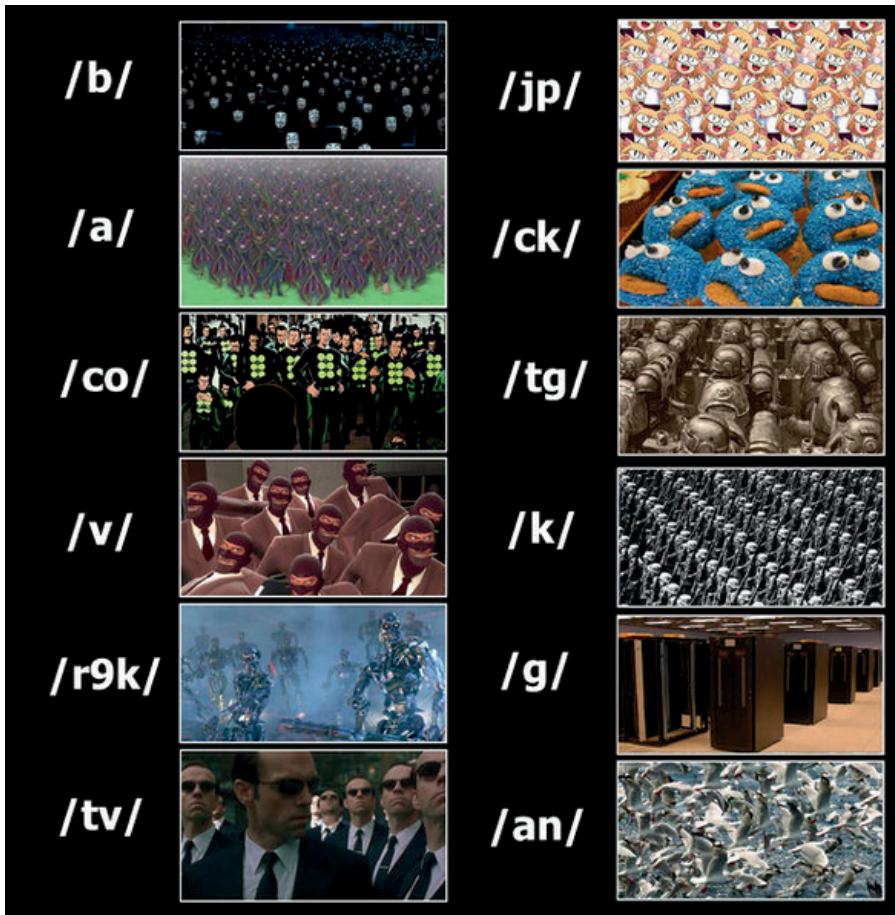
Anonymous\_Propaganda\_by\_raltheshee..  
23,95 €

7. Social network map of different Anonymous offline local chapters (created by one or several users)



8. Graphical representation of the aggregation of Anons on 4chan and of Anonymous as an abstract entity

“Armies of 4chan”. Each picture represents the ‘hive’ of a channel (for instance /a/ is the anime channel and /v/ the video game channel.) Retrieved on 4chan in June 2013.



“Co-existence has created a fucking monster”.  
(Encyclopedia\_Dramatica 2015b)



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