

Ghosts in the machine

An author gets sucked into the murky realm of Internet tricksters Anonymous



Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous by Gabriella Coleman

BY KATHERINE LUCK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The nebulous Internet collective called Anonymous is a many-headed hydra. From its anarchic early days as an outgrowth of the notorious image-posting site 4chan to its evolution into a prominent force for online as well as real-world activism, Anonymous has always seemed designed to be a cultural shape-shifter. Democratic, decentralized and without a consistent philosophical or moral stance, Anonymous' targets have ranged from the Church of Scientology to PayPal, its members lauded as digital freedom fighters by politicians and the media one day, only to be denounced as cyberterrorists the next.

Many have tried to pin down this network of nameless citizens of cyberspace. Are they heroes or villains? Will they be remembered as the vanguard of global activism or mere footnotes in early 21st century?

In "Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous," Gabriella Coleman attempts to answer these questions by delving into the heart of the online conversations, planning sessions and conflicts of the individuals who make up the ever-shifting collective that calls itself Anonymous.

Coleman, who trained as an anthropologist and teaches at Canada's McGill University, spent several years on the digital fringes of the group, seeking to understand both the collective and personal motivations of the elusive tribe of individualists. What began in 2008 as an anthropological study of Anonymous quickly developed into a personal obsession.

"This side project became my life. For over two years, I was constantly jacked in, online for a minimum of five hours a day," Coleman recalls. "At times I even participated, so long as my involvement was legal. My tasks were many: editing manifestos, teaching reporters how to find Anonymous, and correcting misinformation."



ILLUSTRATION BY DEREK GUNDY

Coleman gradually transformed from an observer into an unabashed cheerleader and public relations specialist for the group. For the reader interested in catching a glimpse of the "true face" of Anonymous, this is troubling, as she reveals herself to be an unreliable chronicler rather than an unbiased academic. As Coleman's involvement with the group intensifies over the course of the book, her nonfiction text takes on the flavor of a dramatically embellished memoir. Although she never managed to become a real member of Anonymous, her claims that she was an impartial outsider eventually become unsustainable.

The primary motivations driving Coleman's deep dive into Internet activism seem to be the dueling forces of curiosity and fear. As she grew more intrigued by the individual personalities that populated Anonymous, her fear of their technological powers increased apace.

Anonymous "was a name synonymous with trolling: an activity that seeks to ruin the reputations of individuals and organizations and reveal embarrassing and personal information. ... The excitement faded as I contemplated the ruinous reality this could bring down upon me if I got on the wrong side of these notorious trolls."

Although she openly expresses fear of the members of Anonymous, as well as misgivings about their often-dubious motives, she repeatedly flatters the trolls in lengthy Internet chats that she reprints in the book. She apologizes for their unfortunate habit of attaching homophobic slurs to their online communications, and she brushes off even the most misogynistic of their trolling as "witty," "playful" and "awesome and hilarious." Her attempt to cast the group as a modern embodiment of the trickster gods of mythology, which she repeats throughout the book to weaker and weaker effect, is unworthy of a serious anthropologist.

As Coleman becomes enmeshed in the politics and the interests of Anonymous, her ability to translate complex online activism into a coherent account suffers. Ultimately, Coleman herself provides the most damning — and accurate — assessment of "Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy."

"I became entangled in a multiyear research project on (Anonymous) that I have only just now twisted my way out of," she confesses. "I spent years collecting too much material, attempting to build my own labyrinth that would allow me to chart a course through theirs. But when I set out to unravel the tangled threads, to find my way out of the collected stories, rumors, conversations and secrets into some coherent and lucid narrative, I realized in horror that the gossamer material was disintegrating in my hands. I was lost."

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