The Ethics of “Anonymous”

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## Introduction

In the new Age of Technology that we are in now we have become used to information being available instantly at our fingertips. Since the creation of the World Wide Web, society has had access to an ever growing network of information. The very first website, at http://info.cern.ch/hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html, was launched in 1991 according to info.cern.ch. Now just 24 years later according to InternetLiveStats.com their’s just under 956,000,000 websites published out on the Internet for the roughly 3,260,000,000 internet users of the world. According to this same website in about one second 2,443,852 emails are sent, there are 51,574 google searches, and 11,636 YouTube Videos viewed. People use this tool for numerous of reasons ranging from academic research, speaking their mind on public forums, or simply watching funny cat videos. One useful tool that has come from having the internet is the availability of news. Every day people can skim their new site of choice to get a brief overview of what’s been happening all over the globe.

Since this is common place, people are accustomed to having access to current information, and want to get a correct story of what’s going on in the world. Some people don’t feel like the news sites always give an accurate judgment of current events. This is a valid fear, it’s hard to find a news source that’s not heavily biased. Some of these people who have problems with what the media portrays have the ability to get their hands on information (whether legally or not) and feel it’s their duty to share this information with the rest of the world. The hacktivist group Anonymous is full of such people. The question is, are they helping society with their operations for justice or are they just illegally meddling in things they don’t belong in?

There are many ways to go about judging whether or not something is ethically moral or not. You can look at the written laws of society, the unwritten laws of a culture, the actions, the consequences, or the human morality that brought about each decision. Each way of looking at an issue sheds a different light on the subject. Just like a vases shadow would look different to the artist trying to capture it depending on where the light was coming from. However for the sake of this argument let’s look at ethics of Anonoymous through the eyes of a utilitarianist. No matter if what they did was legal or not, no matter their reasoning behind the action, is the result of what they have accomplished over the past seven years something that has bettered society or something that has caused more harm than good?

I believe the evidence shows a resounding case for the betterment of society. Yes the outcome has not always been favorable, yes ordinary innocent people have been negatively affected by the outlash from this groups actions. However for every time someone did something stupid or harmful under the name Anonymous I can show you an example of someone accomplishing something amazing.

## Background

Anonymous got its beginnings in the chat threads on the 4Chan forum boards. 4Chan was an unmoderated chat forum. When you made a post you had the option of posting under your name or posting anonymously under the name anonymous. To readers this had the effect of making it look like all of these anonymous post were all done by one person. This sparked the idea of “anonymous” as a group with multiple people acting as the voice of one. They then came into the spotlight in 2008. The first major operation for Anonymous was in 2008 with Project Chanology. A group of anonymous members got together and brought down the Scientology website through a series of DDoS attacks. The Church of Scientology had recently put out a cease and desist order to take a video off the internet. These anonymous members were outraged that the church belived they could control the internet like that and relatilated with the DDoS attacks, black fax sprees, and numerous prank calls. Since then the name “Anonymous” has been affiliated with numerus internet hacks, ddos attacks, information leaks, and protests. This hacktivist group (activist who use hacking to achieve their goals) is a new unique type of organization. Theirs’s no hierarchy or structure. It’s not one person spearheading the ideas of a group of people. Anonymous is made up of anyone who believes they have the same ideas as Anonymous and wants to do something about it. It’s an open network that’s rapidly growing and anyone with a computer and some semblance of a skill with “hacking” can be a part of it.

However with this uniqueness come one of the major problems with Anonymous. Since anyone can claim to be a part of it, it’s sometimes hard to piece together if something was actually done by and supported by Anonymous or just something some kid did for giggles, or by someone wanting to smear the reputation of Anonymous. For example this was an issue recently in early November of 2015. For a few weeks a bunch of reputable anonymous twitter accounts had been leaking hints that they were going to drop the names of a list of KKK members on Nov 5th. Then on the 2nd, three days early, a list started circulating of “known KKK members”. This list was said to have been released by anonymous. However many of the names on the list were politicians and most of them had strong evidence to back up that they were not in any way racist, especially not full-fledged active KKK members. Shortly after this list was released the same Twitter accounts that had been hinting at a reveal denied having any connections to the circulating list and said that the real list was forthcoming. True to their word they actual list was released three days later on the 5th, this time with actual members information. So who released the first list? There are many theory’s, it could have been something innocent like someone’s idea of a joke, or it could have been a KKK sympathizer’s way of trying to discredit the reputation of this Op before the actual list came out.

## Ethical Framework

According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy the core idea of Utilitarianism is that “whether actions are morally right or wrong depends on their effects. More specifically, the only effects of actions that are relevant are the good and bad results that they produce” (Nathanson). The utilitarianist way of looking at things are the perfect glasses to view the ethics of Anonymous with. With utilitarianism if something is morally right than in a nutshell it is either producing happiness or taking away pain.

Striping it down to the most basic of an example, let’s look at using it to decide what to ice cream to order for a group of 10 people. Let’s say that you can order only one kind of ice cream for everybody and you can only choose between vanilla or chocolate. When you poll your guest on their preferences you find that 7 people prefer chocolate and 3 prefer vanilla. In this case, because having chocolate ice cream would make more people happy and less people disappointed than if you ordered vanilla the right thing to do would be to go with chocolate. It’s important to realize from this example that every vote is weighted the same. It doesn’t matter if you were one of the 3 vanilla voters, you should still order the chocolate because that’s what the group wants.

In the previous example the decision was clear what the right choice was, however in life things are rarely that simple. You have countless variables, and you can’t always foresee all of the effects that an action would take. This leads to many cases where even using utilitaranistic morals it’s not always clear how right or wrong a decision was made. One distinction you have to make is deciding whether or not you’re judging off of the actual consequences or the foreseeable consequences. J.J.C. Smart posed an excellent moral scenario to highlight the differences between the two. If a person saves someone from drowning, but that person that they saved ends up being a young Hitler was the decision to save his live right or wrong? The saver had no way of knowing that the boy he was saving would grow up and be responsible for the death of thousands.

## Your Position

I believe that ultimately the amount of good that Anonymous has done has outweighed the negative effects that have come from their actions for two reasons. First look at the hard evidence, the amount of pedophiles and KKK members exposed, the justice served in the Steubenville rape case, the correct information getting out to the people in Iran and China. These are effects that are helping rid the world of negative actions and pain. Secondly go a step further and look at the effects the efforts of Anonymous are having on our culture.

Governments are realizing that the internet is a powerful tool that can be used to control the masses. Someone needs to be there to keep them honest. Also with the growing conflict between the needs for security vs the demands for freedom we need a voice that’s there demonstrating the weak links in security companies protection of our data and information.

## Rebuttal

Many people view Anonymous as entitled kids sitting in their parent’s basement wreaking havoc on the world out of boredom. They see that their actions are “illegal” and they believe the media when it reports that they’re not doing anything useful. They believe that Anonymous is “Run by a horde of overly loud and opinionated kids (either by age or by merit) whose real concern is not liberty by privilege.”(Abbott) However even though each of those statements can be true in individual cases Anonymous as a group is an admirable collection that seeks to project people from persecution and false information. They are not the hero’s this age wants but they are what we need.

On November 13th 2015, terrorist rampaged through Paris in an attack that eventually left 129 people dead and 352 wounded. The next day the militant Islamic State group, otherwise known as ISIS, took credit for the attack. Shortly after Anonymous released a video about their next operation, OpParis. This operation would focus on retaliation for the attack by targeting ISIS twitter accounts that they use for propaganda and promoting. Just three days after the attack Anonymous reported that they had taken down more than 5,500 accounts. Many people criticized this action. According to them, this was hurting government information collection agencies who were monitoring these accounts to keep track of ISIS agents. Personally I don’t think that was a good enough reason to keep these accounts up. ISIS recruiting relies heavily on social media. They spit out propaganda with the hope to gather more people, especially from the younger generation, to their cause. With these twitter accounts gone they have temporarily lost a big platform for recruitment and a way of communicating. This is a bigger blow to them then it is to whoever was using twitter as their only means to monitor terrorist activities.

I’ll be the first to admit, not everything Anonymous has done has been done with the best intensions. That’s the risk you run with a group that has no organization, hierarchy, or leader. Sometimes they get it wrong and this has caused big problems in the past. Misnaming the Michael Brown shooter was probably one of their biggest errors. On August 9, 2014 an unarmed man named Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This caused mass riots over the next few weeks not just in Ferguson but in places all over the US. Shortly after Anonymous got involved and on August 14th, five days after the shooting, they released the name and information of who they said was the police officer that was behind the shooting. However they got it wrong. Bryan Willman had never been to Ferguson, he wasn’t even a police officer. But these facts didn’t stop him from having to go into protective custody after his name, photo’s, DOB, address, and other person information was leaked. This obvious caused mental harm and stress to Willman’s and his family. In an interview he stressed the harm anonymous had caused him “I’m stressed out, and don’t sleep very well...I feel scarred by the trauma online, and doubt I willl ever return to social media again...For a group who want information to be released to be willing to put peoples lives in danger – that’s pretty low. They turned me into a victim. They got it wrong.”(Willman) Understandably there was no good that came out of this action. No one could argue otherwise. However keep in mind, this information release was done by only one member. He was a prominent member within Anonymous but he did not have the backing of the group as a whole. Other Anonymous members had cautioned him before he released the information, warning him of the dire consequences that could result from this action. “Don’t you think this is dangerous?” one anon wrote, “people would definitely want to murder him”(Doemela). These is just one unfortunate effect of the Anonymous group structure. Yet it’s an unavoidable consequence of the freedom of having a collective vs. one voice. In the long run the benefits of the checks and balances effect that the collective mindset has on making sure Anonymous as a whole balances out bias’s is worth these accidents that come from splinter members.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I believe it is clear that they are doing more good to society than harm. In this new age of Technology we are at a very important time in human history where we can shape how society views and shares information. The laws we make, and actions we take now will set a standard for generations to come. It’s important that we show them the power of information and to make sure that they use it right.

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