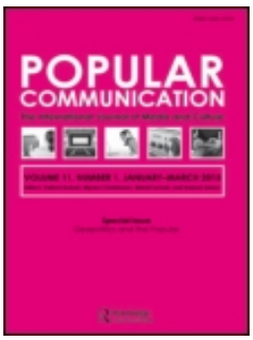

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Anonymous and the Political Ethos of Hacktivism

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This article examines the ethos of the hacktivist movement Anonymous. It considers the subcultural roots of Anonymous and the political and ethical values articulated by the movement. The article highlights key points of tension within the Anonymous ethos: nihilism and idealism, utopianism and dystopianism, individualism and collectivism, and negative and positive liberty. The article argues that while Anonymous can be broadly understood as cyberlibertarian, it is more complex and contradictory than this singular label implies. However, it also argues that the Anonymous ethos is not so amorphous that it prevents ideological analysis and critique. The article concludes by discussing the wider political significance of Anonymous when seen in this light.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the ethos of the hacktivist movement Anonymous. It considers its subcultural roots and the political and ethical values articulated by the movement. In particular, the paper draws attention to key points of tension within the Anonymous ethos: nihilism and idealism, utopianism and dystopianism, individualism and collectivism, and negative and positive liberty. Existing literature provides varying assessments of hacktivist values. One perspective portrays Anonymous specifically (Coleman, 2011a, p. 511) and hacktivism more generally (Liu, 2004, pp. 361–367) as essentially fluid or "rhizomatic" and thus resistant to stable ideological categories. Another perspective identifies hacktivist movements such as Anonymous with "information anarchism" and libertarian values (Jordan, 2008, p. 77). A further perspective sees Anonymous reflecting liberal ideology while containing seeds of a socialist worldview (Fuchs, 2013). This article aims not to reject any of these perspectives but rather to add a complementary one. Characterizing Anonymous as ostensibly libertarian or, specifically, cyberlibertarian (see Golumbia, 2013) is valuable but underplays ideological complexities and tensions within the movement. Emphasizing the movement's rhizomatic and shape-shifting qualities, though, risks understating some clearly identifiable political and moral positions of the movement. This article seeks to complement existing scholarship navigating between both analytical poles, suggesting that Anonymous is too complex for a singular ideological label such as "cyberlibertarian" but not so amorphous that it prevents ideological analysis and critique.

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This article offers a theoretical analysis drawing on secondary literature, but also on popular sources containing testimony from Anonymous participants—these serve as primary texts for critical analysis. These texts (a book-length collection of reflections by Anonymous members, a journalistic book documenting the movement, and a documentary film) illustrate a series of tensions or oppositions within the movement's political ethos. They do not grant direct access to the movement in the way that ethnographies can, but have the virtue of highlighting a breadth and diversity of Anonymous voices, and of presenting those voices in a more reflective and less strategic mode compared with the study of Anonymous' own campaign videos. Again, the aim is not to question the validity of these other approaches or data sources but rather to provide a complementary perspective.

Here the term "ethos" is drawn from political theory to indicate not only expressed political and ethical values but also the behavior, character, and disposition of individual political actors (Heclo, 2003), groups, or institutions (Diamond, 1986, pp. 77–78). It also describes attitudes towards political institutions and processes (Wilson & Banfield, 1971). Finally, "political ethos" refers also to "politicized sentiments" (Jenkins, 1991, p. 141); this underscores how moral and political values are bound up with emotions including passions and resentments. As such, the term ethos (rather than ethics or values) is deployed to include emotional as well as moral and political registers of Anonymous.

The article first provides some background to Anonymous including its roots, tactics, and values. It then moves to a critical analysis of the movement's ethos, first by unpacking the term cyberlibertarian as a descriptor for Anonymous, and then through the framework of key binary oppositions (nihilism/idealism; utopia/dystopia; individualism/collectivism; positive/negative liberty). It concludes by discussing the broader political significance of Anonymous in light of this analysis.

ANONYMOUS AND HACKTIVISM

The term "hacktivist," commonly applied to Anonymous, combines computer hacking and activism. For Anonymous, the hacker subculture preceded the activism, in common with another well-known hacker group Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc) established in the 1980s, and in contrast to another, the Electronic Disturbance Theater (hacking in support of the Zapatistas) for whom hacking was always a political tool. Anonymous and cDc also shared a notorious target, the Church of Scientology. We should not overstate the groups' similarities: cDc members have, for example, criticized tactics deployed by Anonymous such as defacing or taking down websites as hypocritical attacks on free speech (Allnut, 2011). But both groups share a sense that computer technology is more than *just* a tool for achieving political ends (Taylor, 2005, p. 46). The ethos of Anonymous is technophilic and digital technology is heralded not only as a way of life for group members but also as a driving force for reshaping society.

The term hacktivist, apart from giving the false impression that computer hacking is the only weapon in Anonymous's arsenal (which includes street protests, media campaigns, and distributed denial of service, or DDoS, attacks which are not strictly hacks), also fails to capture how Anonymous' roots lie beyond hacking and activism in the online subculture of the 4chan image board, particularly in subdomain /b/. Founded in 2003 by American teenager Chris Poole, 4chan was little known beyond its participants until its recent notoriety thanks to Anonymous.

Conceived initially as forum for anime, it came to specialize in adolescent "gross-out" content, pornography, and politically incorrect humor. It became a carnivalesque celebration of free speech through the transgression of conventions and taboos around depictions of violence and sex. 4chan was also an incubator for now ubiquitous memes such as lolcats: 4chan juxtaposed innocuous and cutesy with extreme and intentionally offensive material (Knuttila, 2011; Stryker, 2011). Participants were either anonymous or pseudonymous, but a joke idea of "Anon" as a singular identity caught on and the beginnings of Anonymous took root. 4chan was a rowdy place, and tension flared especially between those who embraced collective anonymity and those who cultivated pseudonymous identities, the latter disparaged by the former as "namefags." Politically incorrect language was and remains a hallmark: 4chan and Anonymous members routinely trade homophobic, racist and misogynistic language. The degree to which the idioms of 4chan and Anonymous correlate with racist, misogynistic, or homophobic *attitudes* is questionable (Olson, 2013, p. 411)—participants often claim the language is, instead, a subversive performance of incivility.

Anonymous hacktivism emerged at the intersection of pranksterism, or "trolling," and reaction against institutional practices perceived to impinge on the sanctity of free speech: "I came for the lulz but stayed for the outrage" as one of ethnographer Gabriella Coleman's respondents put it (2011b, p. 3). The Church of Scientology's attempt in 2008 to suppress a leaked video of Tom Cruise talking in rapturous and incoherent terms about the religion sparked a huge reaction. This began with mockery of Scientology's naïve disregard for the "Streisand effect," whereby attempts to suppress content simply fuel its circulation and notoriety. It evolved into a more serious (though never humorless) battle against an exploitative, wealthy, and powerful cult, energizing existing Anons and attracting new ones. The "Chanology" campaign was waged online (DDoS attacks), via phone and fax (prank calls and black faxes) and on the streets. Anonymous would later target a smaller but ideologically more noxious religious cult, the Westbro Baptist Church. Other high profile campaigns were waged against private computer security firm HBGary in 2011 (in direct retaliation against the firm's boastful but erroneous claims about outing—or "d0xing"—Anonymous members), and PayPal, Visa and Mastercard in 2010 after they disabled donation facilities for Wikileaks, allegedly under pressure from US authorities. "Operation Payback" targeted the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in retaliation for attempts to take down file-sharing site the Pirate Bay. In 2010 "Operation Titstorm" targeted the Australian government in response to its proposed mandatory internet pornography filter (Kravets, 2010). Anonymous tends to treat pornography, controversially, as a straightforward free speech issue. Moreover, it shared with other interest groups the view that a filter ostensibly targeting child pornography would be a "slippery slope" toward broader internet censorship—as one Anon remarks: "However abhorrent I might find these things, even more abhorrent is the idea that someone else can tell me what I can and can't look at" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 128).

Anonymous splinter group LulzSec targeted broadcaster PBS in 2011 after it aired *Wikisecrets*, a documentary the group perceived as biased against Wikileaks and Julian Assange (PBS, 2011). *The Sun* newspaper in the United Kingdom was hacked in the same year in response to the phone hacking scandal at Rupert Murdoch's News International. These LulzSec hacks undercut an established Anonymous convention against targeting media organizations, a principle designed to avert hypocritical attacks on free expression. 2011 also saw the infamous hack (now under the banner of "AntiSec") on global corporation Stratfor (Norton, 2011). Latterly Anonymous (stung

by various arrests and convictions in the United States and United Kingdom during 2011) has participated in actions alongside Occupy groups and assisted in leaking documents associated with the Edward Snowden/NSA scandal. It also provided assistance and guidance to protesters in Tunisia and then other countries involved in the Arab Spring who faced censorship, surveillance and crack-downs on dissidents. More recently, Anonymous has attacked copyright institutions, including the RIAA and MPAA, in the wake of debates around the controversial Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the shutdown of file locker service MegaUpload and extradition proceedings against its founder Kim Dotcom on piracy charges. In 2013, Anonymous members attacked the Department of Justice in the wake of indicted internet activist Aaron Swartz's suicide (Limer, 2013).

Anonymous tactics range from simple DDoS and botnet attacks, website defacement, and social engineering (tricking people into revealing security details), through to sophisticated hacking, locating, and exploiting security vulnerabilities and breaching large organizations' information technology networks. Tactics are commonly mixed within particular "Ops." DDoS attacks work on scale: large numbers of people (requiring few technical skills) use simple software to overwhelm a site with traffic. This method is inclusive, fostering a sense of community, yet also commonly disparaged for limited effectiveness, for crudeness, and for landing too many unwitting young adults on the wrong side of the law. Botnets hijack remote computers (unbeknownst to their owners) to attack a target, and control of botnets is a source of elite status among Anons (Olson, 2013). (Elite status entails operatives using consistent pseudonyms over time, suggesting the group's name is a partial misnomer: anonymity, pseudonymity, and sometimes real-world identities co-exist within the movement.) Website defacements allowed Anonymous to develop its brand identity: simple black and white imagery and text, righteous and foreboding language (designed to unsettle targets and to amuse those in the know). LulzSec hacks adopted a more explicitly pranksterish tone: a spoofed report of Tupac Shakur turning up alive in New Zealand appeared on PBS online (Markoff, 2011) and *The Sun*'s website revealed Rupert Murdoch had taken his own life in the wake of the phone hacking scandal (Arthur, 2011).

Anonymous has also been fertile ground for hackers to showcase both technical and social engineering skills. Hacker culture is imbued with a meritocratic and competitive ethos whereby hackers and security experts seek to outdo each other (Levy, 2010, pp. 32–33). The classic if simplistic distinction in hacker culture is between legitimate "white hats" (hackers hired to locate security vulnerabilities) and "black hats" or "crackers" with malevolent motives. "Gray hats" execute unauthorized hacks with a benign motive to expose security flaws, though reputation and status may also be at stake (Bozzo, 2009). Anonymous, however, does not quite fit this typology. Detractors may view them as black hats, while the longer-term, if unintended, consequences of their actions may be more like gray hat hacking—unauthorized hacks resulting ultimately in their target organizations enhancing security. Nonetheless they differ in their overtly moral and political motives. Anonymous's roots are essentially prepolitical: the movement emerged from a subculture dedicated to "lulz" and poking fun at authority (hence pre- rather than apolitical), but a more serious political purpose emerged with battles against powerful and corrupt governmental, corporate, and religious interests. Indeed, a fault-line opened up within the movement as some wished to keep the actions focused on lulz and pranks and disparaged as "moralfags" those who pursued a more overtly political and moral purpose. The following sections examine this purpose more systematically, first through the lens of cyberlibertarianism.

POLITICS OF ANONYMOUS

David Golumbia claims that Anonymous is a cyberlibertarian entity (2013, p. 16). Cyberlibertarianism, a term emerging in the 1990s, reflects the prevailing philosophy of the hackers and technology entrepreneurs responsible for developing the internet and for defending it from government regulation (Borsook, 2000; Naughton, 2000). Cyberlibertarianism lives on today through organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), campaigns against the expansion of digital copyright regimes, and various (though not all) pro-piracy and anti-surveillance campaigns. Golumbia defines cyberlibertarianism broadly as faith in the capacity for unconstrained progress in digital technology to solve social problems including inequality of opportunity, shortcomings in the democratic process, and unequal access to knowledge and education. "Unconstrained" in this context actually means directed by market principles, with governments keeping out of a domain they are perceived neither to understand nor to have the capacity to control. Technology, like the market, is viewed as a complex emergent phenomenon, prone to the Hayekian "fatal conceit." A classic statement of cyberlibertarianism is John Perry Barlow's (1996) *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.* There is also a strong strain of technological determinism within cyberlibertarianism. This can be expressed fatalistically in terms of a "new reality" (for better or worse) dictated by the juggernaut of technological progress: governments, corporations, and individuals must simply adapt or perish. Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970) and *The Third Wave* (1980) are classic touchstones. This position echoes the *economic* fatalism of neoliberal ideology and Margaret Thatcher's notorious TINA doctrine ("there is no alternative"). Technological determinism can also be expressed in more utopian and technophilic terms: techno-utopians including George Gilder and *Wired* magazine have evangelized for a technologically-driven world of rational markets, free individuals and post-ideological politics.

Golumbia argues that cyberlibertarianism deploys an exclusively negative conception of freedom—freedom to act without constraint so long as one avoids constraining the freedom of others (ironically the Hayekian conceit is smuggled back in here, as if impacts on others were transparent, direct and measurable), and neglects and even disparages positive conceptions of freedom such as support for government policies placing universal access requirements on telecoms companies or regulation of online hate speech. While Golumbia's essay raises useful questions, assigning the cyberlibertarian tag wholesale to a diversity of individuals and institutions is limiting: to suggest Jimmy Wales (Wikipedia founder and professed Randian), Julian Assange (of Wikileaks), Lawrence Lessig (Creative Commons founder), and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook chief executive officer) are all cut from the same ideological cloth represents a rather blunt analysis of their respective statements and actions. More importantly here, though, Golumbia's attribution of the label to Anonymous begs further questions.

It is true that cyberlibertarianism and the hacker ethic are almost of a piece. Steven Levy (2010, pp. 27–38) outlines the following core principles of hacker culture: "All information should be free" (often rendered anthropomorphically as "information *wants* to be free"); "Mistrust authority—promote decentralization" (a libertarian euphemism for "trust markets, not governments"); "Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position"; "Computers can change your life for the better" (elsewhere in Levy's book this principle morphs into the promise of a better *world* thanks to computers). Such principles clearly resonate with many Anons. This is especially clear in a number of recent media texts featuring

testimony from Anonymous participants. While the campaign videos that have largely served as the public face of Anonymous hyperbolize and even ironize its message, these texts feature some of the voices behind the Anonymous mask in a more reflective vein, at arm's length from the crossfire of Ops and media publicity (though of course they are not free from mediation and performativity). In Brian Knappenberger's (2012) documentary *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists,* we hear from a range of influential, if second tier, Anons. Journalist Parmy Olson's *We Are Anonymous* (2013) fleshes out some of the backstories and motives of key participants (including the infamous "Topiary," aka Jake Davis, who was subsequently arrested and convicted by UK authorities). And a book of unedited submissions from unnamed Anons, published in the United Kingdom—*Anonymous on Anonymous* (2013)—is a polyvocal collage of ideas, reflections, dialogues, manifestos, and essays (some repurposed from other sources) lacking a singular narrative or explanatory framework but providing insight into participants' beliefs, motivations and aspirations. What these texts collectively suggest is that trying to fit Anonymous into an ideological box labeled cyberlibertarian (however broadly conceived) is problematic, implying a degree of coherence and common purpose that is less convincing on closer inspection.

In what follows I draw on these testimonial sources as I trace some of the ideological and ethical threads running through Anonymous. I aim to show how the movement's ethos can be characterized as a series of tensions. Most political and social movements contain ideological, cultural, or social tensions. These may be productive, adding strength and dynamism (conservationists and clean technology advocates coexisting within the Green movement, for example), or they may be more troublesome fault lines (even fatal contradictions) threatening a movement's vitality and durability (the difficulty with which social democratic parties balance working and middle class interests, for example). It is not possible to say conclusively whether the tensions within Anonymous discussed below are productive or counterproductive. But I will go on to suggest that they impact any assessment of the movement's wider political significance. I will suggest that the voices articulated through these testimonial texts are simultaneously nihilistic and idealistic, dystopian and utopian, egoistic and collectivist, and dedicated to the negative freedoms of libertarianism yet also concerned with collectivist goals of equality and justice.

NIHILISM/IDEALISM

4chan has always reveled in nihilistic humor (participants have even debated nihilism philosophically via Nietzsche and Leo Strauss) and the nihilistic impulse has continued to reverberate through Anonymous. Critics and adherents alike have noted it: former NSA chief Michael Hayden lambasted the group as nihilists, akin to al-Qaida, (Ackerman, 2013), and a disaffected former member lamented a *decline* of nihilism and the ascendency of the "moralfags" (Greenberg, 2011). A full page in *Anonymous on Anonymous* is given over to an (unattributed) quote from artist Sam Durant: "I don't believe in nothing—I feel like they ought to burn down the world—just let it burn down" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 169). In the same publication, though, nihilistic sentiment jostles with images of Che Guevara and the clenched fist symbol of resistance, quotes on the romantic spirit of rebellion from HL Mencken, and of course references to the romantic anti-hero Guy Fawkes. Nihilism and romantic idealism are twin sides of a coin (unsurprisingly, two millennial movies—the nihilistic *Fight Club* [1999] and the idealistic *The Matrix* [1999]—are the most commonly invoked). The conjunction of nihilistic and idealistic impulses

is hardly unique in youth-based subcultures and protest movements. The countercultural and protest movements of the late 1960s, for example, gave rise to both flower power and the militant Baader-Meinhof insurgents; it was a movement inspired both by Marcuse's libidinal manifesto *Eros and Civilization* (1955) *and* by his far more dismal diagnosis in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), which invoked a nihilistic movement of Great Refusal. Popular readings of Nietzsche (folk-hero of many countercultural movements) are similarly caught between nihilistic interpretations and a life-affirming and idealistic emphasis on the "transvaluation of values" (Nietzsche, 1968). While nihilistic attitudes are commonly disparaged as fatalistic, juvenile and even dangerous, the nihilism of Anonymous can be seen in the contemporary climate as an outlet for frustration toward the apparent lack of alternative visions that might challenge current political, social, and economic systems.

But Anonymous does not stop at simple nihilism. Echoes of Dada, the Situationist International and, in a more recent vein, culture jammers such as the Yes Men manifest in the antics and desire for spectacle and spoofing. We see a simultaneous critique *and* embrace of the absurd which, in existentialist philosophy, is closely linked to nihilism as mockery of conventional values. Trolling in its most playful (as opposed to vengeful) form is a kind of online absurdism. The absurd was on display at the Chanology protests (signs reading "honk if you're in a car" and "don't worry—we're from the internet" for example). Absurd spectacle characterized the LulzSec attacks on PBS and News International. Some of Anonymous' tactics can be understood as a kind of détournement (hijacking and altering websites and misappropriating proprietary data) and reaction against the recuperation (another concept in situationism) of information and culture through copyright regimes and state and corporate surveillance systems.

Nihilism and idealism coexist within the Anonymous ethos. This duality also features strongly in the history of anarchism (Marshall, 2008). While Coleman (2011c) has persuasively cautioned against overstating affinities between Anonymous and anarchism, *Anonymous on Anonymous*, with an emphasis on voices from Anonymous UK and in the wake of both Occupy and British government austerity, contains strong anarchist sentiments, underscored by punk "zine" aesthetics. The term "idealistic" is used here in both its everyday and philosophical senses: romantic or even righteous attachment to principles *and* belief in the power of ideas (more so than of material factors) to shape history. This second sense manifests in the commonplace assertion by participants that Anonymous is not a material entity or institution but merely "an idea" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 182). Topiary's final tweet prior to his arrest read "You cannot arrest an idea." Coleman (n.d.) has referred to Anonymous simply as "a cluster of ideals." The potency of "ideas" that transcend particular identities or interests has been underscored in recent times by, for example, the Occupy Movement whose biggest legacy, perhaps, has been to alter the discourse of contemporary politics by entrenching the idea of the 99%: here, the power of an idea is very tangible. To a lesser degree, Anonymous, too, has helped entrench the idea of "the internet" as an anonymous but powerful "we" demanding freedom from interference and encroachment by government or big business.

Yet the anonymity of the idea may obscure the interests behind it. Olson's (2013) journalistic account of Anonymous usefully reveals participants as real, embodied people, many living challenging or fractured lives, and Knappenberger's documentary (2012) provides visual embodiment: predominantly young white male protagonists. While this reinforces a hacker stereotype (socially awkward boys joke about meeting "hot girls" and "getting laid" after the Scientology protests), elsewhere Anons confront that stereotype. "Many still see this movement as solely a

loose-knit group of hackers, young anarchic geeks. It is NOT," says one contributor to *Anonymous on Anonymous*: "I am, for instance, a 60-year-old woman who would not have a clue of how to hack into a computer" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 54). Embodied identities do matter, then, and the group's rhetorical idealism, including its meritocratic ethos and aspiration to disregard status, can serve as a mystification as well as an insight into its ideals. As an example, the influential *Hacker Manifesto*, penned in 1986 by "The Mentor," aka Loyd Blankenship (a white male hacker), is published in full in *Anonymous on Anonymous*, declaring: "We [hackers] exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias" (cited in Anonymous, 2013, p. 146).

There is idealism in the everyday sense, too, as participants commonly express faith in the movement through righteous language: "We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us," runs the tagline of numerous Anonymous videos and publications; "We see, we judge" declares another (p. 6). Such righteousness may often be laced with irony, but it is doubtful it can be characterized as *merely* ironic. Throughout *Anonymous on Anonymous*, for example, quasi-religious zeal is evident. Anonymous is referred to as a "creed": "Those who follow the creed are Anonymous. Those who make the attaining of knowledge their highest priority, are of the collective" (p. 180) states one Anon, hinting at a kind of spiritual enlightenment attainable through discipline and focus. "For me, been [sic] anonymous is like being born again," states another (p. 135). Another talks of the collective "radiat[ing] justice unto others" (p. 183). Others talk of an "awakening," a "fog clearing," a "journey down a rabbit hole" (p. 148) with echoes of *The Matrix* but also reminiscent of a religious cult: "All your life you have known that something is not right with this world. You can FEEL it in your heart. We all can. Anonymous are here to re-align the people with the truth" (p. 8); "Since I was a kid, I've always suspected that the world I existed in was fake, shallow and an illusion, but never had the knowledge to understand what was wrong . . . And now Anonymous is my home" (p. 37). This shades from the personal into the political: "Our great movement [is] the only one that has brought hope to millions of world citizens after one century of complete despair" (p. 124); and messages of solidarity with Iranian protestors are intoned with a rather priestly mix of support and rebuke: "To those that would remain intimidated into subdued silence: You have passively enabled your government to make a mockery of your freedom. Now is your chance for action, for redemption . . . A new dawn is approaching, that will set you and your great country free from the shackles of oppression, tyranny and torture. It will let you exhale, and finally take the first breath that will fill your lungs with strength, wisdom and freedom" (p. 134). These pious tones could be dismissed simply as humorous echoes of films such as *V for Vendetta* and *The Matrix* that have inspired Anons, or as ironic gestures. But their prevalence in these testimonial texts (and especially *Anonymous on Anonymous*) suggests in fact strong and sincere attachment to the movement's ideals.

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

Anonymous rhetoric also oscillates between utopian and dystopian registers. Utopianism is conveyed through technophilic sentiments: a section in *Anonymous on Anonymous* entitled "We love the internet" waxes lyrical on the "awesome things it gives us" (2013, p. 22) and tells us we ("even the impoverished") are richer than "the richest Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt" for the ability to "hear the voice of a loved one from . . . the other side of the planet" (p. 34). But the internet is also seen to harbor a potential dystopia characterized by systematic surveillance and censorship

(p. 34). In this vein, Anons see themselves "surfing the waves of history" (Knappenberger, 2012), proclaiming that we are at a historical crossroads. Utopia and dystopia are best conceived not as irreconcilable opposites but as twin elements in a mode of thinking that opposes the strictures of pragmatic realism (see, e.g., Gordin, Tilley, & Prakash, 2010, pp. 1–3). Both are commonly disparaged as unrealistic at best and dangerous at worst, but may also be indispensable in creative and critical thinking about the present and the future (Levitas, 2010), especially in the contemporary political climate where "there is no alternative" doctrine prevails despite chronic social, geopolitical, economic and environmental crises (see Fisher, 2009).

The dystopian symbolism of Anonymous (the masks and the foreboding messages of impending judgment) is reflected in member testimony: "We live in a time that far surpasses George Orwell's nightmarish vision of *Nineteen Eight-Four* and hurtle toward an even more hellish future. This future, the New World Order, is desired by only the power hungry tiny minority on top of the pyramid. For the rest of us, potentially destined to be bound in abject slavery, life will not be worth living" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 54). But dystopian thinking can also be a pretext for utopianism and the same Anon continues: "I genuinely consider the movement to be one which will continue gather [sic] enough force to be instrumental in steering humanity away from the future . . . We are racing against time . . . . but I have faith . . . . . WE WILL SUCCEED!!!!" (p. 55). Coleman (2012, p. 86) sees in Anonymous the kind of utopian impulse theorized by Ernst Bloch—not wildly optimistic and totalizing blueprints but the presence and resilience of hope and "wishful thinking" embedded in fragments of everyday and popular culture, even amid a general atmosphere of despair or resignation (Bloch, 1986). But while Bloch defended "wishful thinking," he also delineated *mere* wishful thinking or "abstract utopianism" (which consoles and pacifies) from wishful thinking containing the seeds of a plausible movement for change, a "concrete utopia." A movement emphasizing the power of ideas above all else may, then, be prone to abstract utopianism.

INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM

Another polarity is individualism versus a spirit of collective endeavor. Egoistic concerns are reflected in the sanctification of free speech above all else: "It's the freedom that I cherish," says one Anon, "to say what the fuck I want whenever I want" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 126). Another laments the way OpIsrael (a 2013 pro-Palestinian action) diverted focus from OpWCIT, a protest against UN/ITU moves to enlarge its role in global internet governance: OpWCIT concerned "communication and privacy" and these are "the most important thing" (p. 104). Possessive individualism manifests in statements against "any corporation that seeks to limit you whether this be bandwidth caps, restrictions on your files and media or outright censorship" (p. 133), implying equivalence among data caps, copyright, and censorship. But individualism is also countered by a strong anti-leader and anti-celebrity ethic within Anonymous (Coleman, 2011b, p. 4) and widespread disdain for "namefags" and "leaderfags." Certain key operatives accrued celebrity status (under pseudonyms such as Topiary and Sabu), but the movement as a whole values the ethos of the "hive mind."

This suggests a particular mode of collectivism. While Coleman characterizes Anonymous as driven by consensus and "radical democratic decision making" (2012, p. 95), it is less about deliberation than spontaneous "swarming" whereby participants, other than those involved in initial

planning, must decide on the spur of the moment whether to join an action. "Populism" may be more apt than "radical democracy" in this context. A confronting slogan of the Anonymous hive mind is "none of us are as cruel as all of us." In Knappenberger's documentary, Anons explicitly define Anonymous as an "emergent phenomenon"—visualized through imagery of birds flying in formation—conjuring spontaneous order out of chaos. Indeed, biological metaphors often feature in Anonymous discourse as they do in cyberlibertarian rhetoric more broadly: beyond the commonly invoked "hive mind," a more arresting image offered by one Anon is that "the internet is a living thing [and] Anonymous is like the chemo for the cancer that threatens [it]" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 126). Such tropes decenter the individual in favor of the complex, organic whole, yet coexist with a strong individualist libertarian ethos within the movement.

POSITIVE/NEGATIVE LIBERTY

A final polarity within the Anonymous ethos involves positive and negative freedoms. Golumbia's claim that cyberlibertarianism privileges negative liberties is borne out by the sanctification of free speech and privacy and by prominent anti-state rhetoric echoing Barlow's Declaration, pitting government as "dinosaurs" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 19) against the internet's "vibrant marketplace of ideas" (p. 34). But there is again an opposing face. Many of the sources in Olson's book, Knappenberger's documentary and *Anonymous on Anonymous* testify to a sense of empowerment and personal development derived from participating in this "community," having previously felt isolated. Actions related to the Arab Spring fostered solidarity with citizens overseas and the provision of "care packages" (guidance and resources for circumventing censorship and surveillance). Coleman and Golub (2008) have previously explored various 'moral genres' of hacking, comparing for example the almost exclusive focus on negative freedoms exhibited by privacy and encryption-based hacking and a greater focus on positive freedom exhibited by free and open source software (F/OSS) advocates. So too we see concern for both negative *and* positive freedoms within Anonymous. Another example of pursuing positive liberty is the attention given to issues of class, inequality and distributive justice in *Anonymous on Anonymous*. In resonance with the Occupy movement and its discourse of the 99%, several Anons draw attention to issues including student debt, cuts in welfare benefits, poverty, homelessness, and the superrich (Anonymous, 2013, pp. 186–187). Others point to the greed of the ruling classes and the elites. This may not constitute a developed materialist analysis of class, but we cannot say that the Anonymous movement is blind to issues of social class and economic inequality.

CONCLUSION

The way this article has sought to characterize Anonymous has implications for assessing its broader political significance. Characterizing Anonymous simply as cyberlibertarian risks overlooking its multiple and even contradictory registers. It could lead to a view that Anonymous has little to contribute and may even be anathema to a progressive politics founded on positive as well as negative freedoms: for example, attention to social justice (including equalizing access to technology) and expanding the digital commons (positive freedoms that require political intervention), in addition to focusing on freedom *from* surveillance, censorship and the expansion

of copyright. Libertarian values may be most pronounced, but the contradictory nature of the Anonymous ethos also signals space for a progressive political agenda.

Another way to characterize Anonymous is to emphasize its multiplicity and shape-shifting qualities: Coleman's multiple writings on Anonymous have read Anonymous variously (and plausibly) in terms of Blochian utopianism (2012), proto-Marxian critiques of alienated labor (2011a), market libertarianism and elements of black bloc anarchism (2011c), civil libertarianism and liberalism (2011a), and trickster archetypes (2010). The last of these could, in fact, serve as a container for these various other ways of reading Anonymous and raises the prospect of a "trickster politics" (Coles, 2006) or "insurgent democracy" that "promises a responsiveness, suppleness and mobility that just might develop the power to bring forth a significantly better world" (p. 547). On the other hand, this multiplicity could be viewed negatively as part of what Jodi Dean terms "post-politics." Dean (2012) has diagnosed the Occupy movement's lack of traction as a symptom of its inclusiveness and avoidance of "divisive" politics, eschewing leadership hierarchy and discipline in favor of "emergent" organization. For Dean (following Žižek) post-politics is "politics without politics" (2009). Compared to Occupy, Anonymous *has* embraced a more divisive politics: it does not "fail to take to a stand, to name an enemy" (p. 21). Yet the voices of Anonymous *do* aspire to represent "You, Me, Everybody and Nobody" (Anonymous, 2013, p. 134) and "We, the People" without division along Left and Right (p. 135), transcending the "big ideologies" of the past (p. 8). The point here is not that Anonymous should be dismissed as "post-politics," but rather that focusing too heavily on its amorphous qualities risks obscuring some rather stark polarities within its political ethos and, by extension, its potential contribution to a wider political landscape. As such, this analysis of a series of binary oppositions within the ethos has been offered as a complementary perspective suggesting some contradictory implications.

Both the nihilism *and* the (righteous) idealism of the movement may be somewhat disconnected from a practical agenda for political reform. So too the cloak of an anonymous idea risks obscuring the social identities and material interests underpinning political protest. And yet these facets of Anonymous, together with its playful absurdism, should be seen at least partially in the context of subcultural performance, and not as a fully developed political agenda. Strong utopian and dystopian impulses similarly call into question the movement's capacity to engage with the pragmatics of policy reform, even (or perhaps especially) in the spheres it treats as sacrosanct including online surveillance, privacy, censorship and copyright. And yet these same impulses offer a vital broadening of the narrow political imagination of contemporary mainstream politics. The pronounced individualism of the Anonymous ethos threatens to sanctify privacy, free speech and frictionless data flows at the expense of other goals, and yet the movement has also experimented with (relatively) leaderless collectivism and emphasized the values of solidarity. Finally, the right to be left alone (negative freedom) may be celebrated above all else and yet issues of social justice and economic equality have made inroads into the Anonymous ethos.

Is there a place for hacktivism within a progressive digital politics? The answer is surely yes, if a limited one. The actions and performances of Anonymous have provoked debates over control of digital information, and technology has been deployed to ridicule and draw critical attention to various organizations guilty of dubious practices and abuses of power. These are positive and progressive interventions, even if the long-term impact of Anonymous on the institutions and power structures they have targeted proves to be a limited one.

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