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Still Anonymous: GUILT BY ASSOCIATION AND THE OFFICIAL STORY IN NEW YORK TIMES COVERAGE OF ANONYMOUS



by Matthew Yasuoka

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On November 13, 2012, Kylie Kylem tweeted, “I don’t know what to do anymore. I can’t get out of my room. I can’t face the world i don’t want to be alive im done [sic].” Within minutes, Internet trolls started goading her to kill herself. Anonymous, the loosely organized collective of online hackers, immediately responded by attacking the suicide trolls, rebuffing their advances saving Kylie’s life.

This type of “op” (the term used by Anonymous to refer to their protest work) is not uncommon within Anonymous, which is part of “the free culture movement—a coalition as varied as Wikipedia contributors, Flickr photographers and online educators, and prominent figures like Julian Assange.” [1] The organization, while often criticized, prides itself upon its ideological ethos. In fact, The New York Times argues that hacktivists “differ from mainstream computer criminals in that they claim to be motivated by ideals as opposed to financial gain.” [2]

Anonymous’ decentralized, disorganized, and diversified nature lead it to protest injustices as far reaching as Internet laws in North Korea [3] to the government cover-up in the Stuebenville rape case [4] to Scientology’s efforts to defraud members. [5] While characterizing Anonymous may prove difficult, it is clear that the organization is globally involved, politically motivated, and philosophically defined.

In this study, I seek to gain a greater understanding of media coverage patterns of Anonymous. In particular, how the media industrial complex frames and defines Anonymous.

Literature Review

Media analysis

Media scholars use framing to refer to the process that decides information in news stories. Robert Entman defines framing as “selection and salience.” [6] Frames order information, deciding what information is fit to print and what information is unfit. Boykoff and Yasuoka argue, “media frames. . . focus the public’s attention on particular events, issues, and ideas.” [7] Boykoff observes, “media representations. . . are critical links between people’s everyday realities. . . and the ways in which these are discussed at a distance.” [8] Overall, journalists pick specific aspects of events to focus on, in order to organize the chaos of current events. These judgments are made at a distance from the events and, thus, can differ from the actuality on the ground.

The concept of indexing refers to another process of information selection in the media. W. Lance Bennett defines “indexing” as the “range of sources and viewpoints” within a story. [9] Althaus, Edy, Entman, and Phalen observe that indexing studies stem from the fear that media coverage could be “so constrained by. . . debate among political elites that the public remains poorly informed.” Thus, the “empirical goal of. . . indexing is to chart and explain the closeness. . . between media discourse and debate among political elites.” [10] In this paper, I am going to use indexing in a new way. Rather than count the types of sources used by the media, I am going to index the media’s coverage of tactics, counting the number of times each tactic used by Anonymous is mentioned. In doing so, I hope to see whether or not the range of tactics is closer to Anonymous’ diverse toolbox or to the government’s focus on specific tactics, such as vandalism and attacks on credit card companies.

Social movements

Gilham and Noakes differentiate between contained protest groups that are (1) “well known to the police,” (2) “employ familiar tactics,” and (3) are “hierarchically organized” (i.e. they have a leader); [11] and transgressive protest groups that are (1) “not well known,” (2) “use innovative tactics,” and (3) have “a flat organizational structure” (i.e. leaderless). [12] In this paper, I will be considering Anonymous a “transgressive protest group” as it is not a known force to the police (such as PETA or the NAACP), but a new and complex force that uses confusing and novel tactics (such as Doxing, trolling, or DDoS attacks),

while remaining leaderless. Tactics play a large role in understanding social movements. McCarthy and Zald's argue that for social movements, "dilemmas occur in the choice of tactics, since what may achieve one aim may conflict with behavior aimed at achieving another." [13] Movements must balance their tactics and their objectives in order to be effective.

Media coverage of social movements can both help and hinder the movements' efforts. Boykoff notes that, "most people learn what they know about social movements from the media." [14] In a study of political trials involving activists, Barkan observes that media coverage can be an important resource for movements, acknowledging historical and racial divides of coverage patterns. [15]

Methodology

In this study, I am going to index media coverage of Anonymous by looking at (1) whether sources from Anonymous were interviewed; (2) which ideological motivations appear the most, and (3) which tactics used by anonymous received the most coverage.

I decided to focus on The New York Times because it is the third most circulated newspaper in print and the most popular online paper. [16] I used the search terms "CAPS (anonymous) AND internet" on Lexis-Nexis, from which I removed all irrelevant articles, resulting in a 34-article dataset. The unit of analysis for my study was the article. Thus, I read every article and noted, which tactics, ideological motivation, and frame appeared in individual pieces, counting the number of articles that contained each thing I was measuring. The tactics I will be indexing are: cyber vandalism, hacking social media, stealing secrets, counter media coverage, Doxing, and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. Doxing refers to the practice of releasing personal information about a target. DDoS refers to flooding a target site with so much traffic that it crashes. [17]

The ideological motivations I will be indexing are: anti-capitalist ideals, democracy promotion, transparency, anti-rape efforts, and anti-bullying efforts. I also carried out a standard indexing study. I counted the number of articles that quoted sources from Anonymous. I also counted the total number of different Anonymous sources across all articles. I wanted to compare the number of articles and the number of sources to see if there were few articles that quoted Anonymous, few sources from Anonymous, or both.

I am also going to be looking at how Anonymous was framed by

the media. The frames I will be coding for are: the cyberterrorists frame, the guilty by association frame, the hacktivist frame, and the criminality frame. The unit of analysis was the article and multiple frames could be coded for a single article.

Table 1-Tactics

	Cyber Vandalism	Hacking social media sites	Stealing Secrets	Doxing	DDoS	Counter media coverage
Number of articles	8	4	10	5	7	3
Percentage	23.52%	11.76%	29.41%	14.70%	20.59%	8.82%

Table 2-Ideology

	Anti-Capitalism	Democracy promotion	Transparency	Anti-Bullying	Anti-Rape
Number of articles	2	1	7	2	10
Percentage	5.88%	2.94%	20.59%	5.88%	29.41%

I was interested in looking at the intersection between ideology and tactics and how the media coverage changed because of the specific ideological motivation. I created a sub-data set of all the articles that had both a tactic coded and an ideology coded:

Table 3- Correlations between ideology and tactics in media coverage

	Cyber Vandalism	Hacking social media sites	Stealing Secrets	Counter media coverage	Doxing	DDoS
Number of articles	3	0	6	1	5	2
Percentage (n=12)	25.00%	0.00%	50.00%	8.33%	41.67%	16.67%
Percentage (n=35)	23.52%	11.76%	29.41%	8.82%	14.70%	20.59%

I then ran a correlation test and got a 0.82 correlation between the sub-data set and the regular tactics data. This means that 82% of the change is the result of the variable, in this case, the presence of an ideological correlates to the change in the preponderance of the tactics. Doxing’s prevalence increased most drastically when paired with tactics, while DDoS attacks and Hacking Social Media Sites both saw a decline in their prevalence.

Table 4-Frames

	Cyberterrorist frame	Hacktivist Frame	Guilt by Association Frame	Criminality Frame
Number of articles	1	8	10	4
Percentage (n=34)	2.94%	23.53%	29.41%	11.76%

It is interesting to note that The New York Times predominantly avoided the cyberterrorist frame, opting instead to imply criminality or extra-legality, by covering Anonymous in the context of other criminal or reprehensible organizations. For example, in coverage about Silk Road, the online bazaar of drugs and other illegal paraphernalia, the author drops in a single Paragraph, at the end, which mentions an Anonymous member and compares them to Dread Pirate Roberts. [18] In another, article a senior security advisor says, “There are three categories of hackers: Russian criminals trying to rob us blind; the Chinese who are trying to steal our secrets; and then there’s Anonymous. . . we’re treating them all the same.” [19] The coverage here insinuates that Anonymous should be considered in the same grouping as Chinese hackers and “Russian criminals.” This characterization is a subtler form of defamation than the outright accusation of cyberterrorism, a claim that The New York Times only used once, by and large, the paper allowed its readers to connect the dots about Anonymous and its association, with organizations viewed as our enemies and criminals.

Table 5- Indexing-sources

	Articles	Total
Anonymous Sources	8	12
Percentage (n=34)	23.52%	n/a

Overall, it is clear that The New York Times more often than not chose not to interview Anonymous in its coverage of Anonymous. Of course, this could be an extension of the phenomenon observed by Gilham and Noakes regarding leaderless organizations, the fact that “they have no one for the police to directly negotiate with.” [20] By that logic, the lack of organizational structure could also preclude media engagement and interviews, because the mass media lacks clear indicators of whom the authority on the subject is, and, thus, default to other sources that are perceived to have more credibility.

Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that coverage of Anonymous primarily focuses on the transgressive nature of the organization, while emphasizing the ideological aspects of the movement. Further research is needed to understand coverage patterns across publications. Studying the coverage of Anonymous could help media scholars to understand how the prestige press approaches digital activism and new social movements using new tactics. It is worth noting that the theft of government and corporate secrets was the most covered tactic, which could potentially be a reflection of the current political zeitgeist. However, coverage of ideology and tactics in tandem placed a greater emphasis on Doxing indicating a difference between the paper’s perceptions and the tactics used by Anonymous to achieve its goals.

Notes

- [1] Cohen, N. (2013). A Data Crusader, a Defendant and Now, a Cause. *The New York Times*.
- [2] Siegel, M. (2013). Australia Arrests the Professed Head of LulzSec, Which Claims a C.I.A. Hacking. *The New York Times*
- [3] Sang-Hun, C. (2013). North Korea Moves Missile to Coast, but Little Threat Is Seen. *The New York Times*.
- [4] See: <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/anonymous-vs-steubenville-20131127>
- [5] See: http://www.salon.com/2013/10/02/anonymous_vs_scientology_partner/
- [6] Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4). p. 51-58. Quote at 52.
- [7] Boykoff, J. and Yasuoka, M. (2013). Gender and politics at the 2012 Olympics: media coverage and its implications. *Sport in Society*. 1-15. pp. 5.

- [8] Boykoff, M. (2012) *Who Speaks for the Climate?* Loc. 164.
- [9] Bennet, W., Lawrence, R., & Livingston, S. (2006). None Dare Call It Torture: Indexing and the Limits of Press Independence in the Abu Ghraib Scandal. *Journal of Communication* 56. 467-485. pp. 468.
- [10] Althaus, S., Edy, J., Entman, R., & Phalen, P. (1996). Revising the Indexing Hypothesis: Officials, Media, and the Libya Crisis. *Political Communication* 13. 407-421. pp. 408.
- [11] Gilham, P. & Noakes, J. (2007). "More than a March in a Circle": Transgressive Protests and the Limits of Negotiated Management. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 12.4. pp. 343-344.
- [12] Gilham and Noakes (2007). pp. 343, 346.
- [13] McCarthy, J. & Zald, M. (1977). Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory. *American Journal of Sociology* 82(6). 1212-1241. p. 1217.
- [14] Boykoff, J. (2007). *Beyond Bullets*. Oakland, CA: AK Press. p. 16.
- [15] Barkan, S. E. "
- [16] See: <http://stateofthemedias.org/2013/newspapers-stabilizing-but-still-threatened/newspapers-by-the-numbers/>
- [17] See: <https://whyweprotest.net/community/threads/welcome-to-whyweprotest.111548/>
- [18] Bilton, Nick. (2013). "A Digital Underworld Cloaked in Anonymity." *The New York Times*
- [19] Chozick, Amy and Savage, Charlie. (2013). "Hacker Case Leads to Calls For Better Law." *The New York Times*.
- [20] Gilham and Noakes. "'More than a March in a Circle': Transgressive Protests and the Limits of Negotiated Management." *Mobilization*. 341-357. pp. 349

