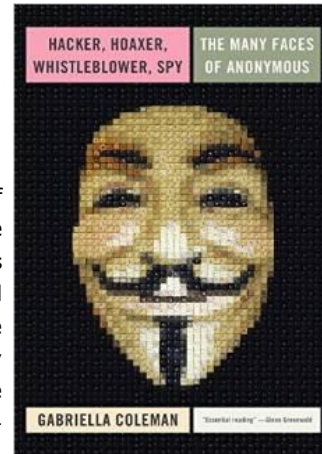


Gabriella Coleman, **Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous**. London, UK and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014, 464 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover); PDF freely available online under Creative Commons licensing.

Reviewed by
Nathalie Maréchal
University of Southern California, USA

Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy is the culmination of more than six years of online anthropological work, detailing the evolution of the group Anonymous from a loose assortment of “kids screwing around on the Internet as lulz-drunk trolls” to “principled dissidents” (p. 3). Author Gabriella Coleman is widely regarded as the preeminent expert on Anonymous, and this book makes it obvious why this is the case. The book is organized chronologically, allowing the reader to follow Coleman’s journey alongside—and at times among—Anonymous.



Chapter 1, “On Trolls, Tricksters, and the Lulz,” describes the birth of Anonymous birth on 4chan, an online forum that Coleman describes as a “cesspool” of the Internet (p. 51). The chapter begins with a discussion of trolling, which refers to “the targeting of people and organizations, the desecration of reputations, and the spreading of humiliating information” online. Trolling, while antithetical to the general norms of polite society, is a key component of Internet culture. Coleman’s explanation of trolling is only the first of many skilled translations between Internet culture and the offline world.

Chapter 2, “Project Chanology—I Came for the Lulz but Stayed for the Outrage,” recounts Anonymous’ first campaign, against the Church of Scientology in 2008, which combined online direct action with more traditional street protests in the physical space. It was at this time that Anonymous adopted the Guy Fawkes mask from the Hollywood film “V for Vendetta.”

Chapter 3, “Weapons of the Geek,” delves into Anonymous’ relationship with WikiLeaks, focusing on the key differences and similarities between the two entities and their philosophies. Not the least among these differences is the disconnect between WikiLeaks, which Julian Assange “built up as a carefully sculpted life’s work” (p. 88) and Anonymous’ complete rejection of individual self-promotion or fame-seeking.

Chapter 4, “The Shot Heard Round the World,” recounts Operation Payback, Anonymous’ campaign against financial institutions that refused to process donations to WikiLeaks, and related efforts such as the DDoS (distributed denial of service) and hacking attacks against security firm HBGary Federal. Chapter 5, “Anonymous Everywhere,” follows Anonymous’ political activities related to the Arab Spring. Taken together, these three chapters present an otherwise untold account of some of the most consequential political events of the early 21st century.

Chapter 6, “‘Moralfaggotry’ Everywhere,” explores the tensions between the lulz, political activity, and norms against “‘namefagging’—attaching your identity to your actions” (p. 189) while continuing the mostly linear narrative of Anonymous’ exploits, as do chapter 7, “Revenge of the Lulz,” chapter 8, “LulzSec,” and chapter 9, “AntiSec,” each focusing on a particular phase of Anonymous activities centered around a specific crew of Anons. While the exploits described in these chapters are less well-known than those described in chapters 3–5, the ethnographic insight is perhaps the richest, especially since by this point Coleman was already a widely recognized expert on Anonymous and occasionally served as a spokesperson of sorts for the group.

Chapter 10, “The Desire of a Secret Is to Be Told,” and chapter 11, “The Sabutage,” take the reader from Occupy Wall Street protests in September 2011 to the Steubenville, Maryville, and Halifax gang rapes, which unleashed a singularly feminist wave of online vigilante justice. These chapters also pay significant attention to Coleman’s interactions with Jeremy Hammond and Barrett Brown, who are currently serving prison time in connection with the Stratfor hack of over 50,000 credit card numbers, as well as Sabu, who was later revealed to be an FBI informant. Despite being a private intelligence company, Stratfor did not password-protect the database containing its customers’ credit card information, and the card numbers themselves were “saved as clear text, instead of behind a digital fortress of encryption, as is standard industry practice” (p. 341). This cavalier attitude toward data security is a capital sin in hacker culture, and is seen as asking to be hacked. For some Anons (as well as non-Anons in this sector), exposing poor data security is a public service designed to frighten others into tightening their own security. The law, however, sees it differently.

Methodologically, Coleman’s online anthropology will be of interest to both “meat-space” (a derogatory term used half-jokingly by denizens of the Internet to describe the offline world) anthropologists and to Internet researchers from other disciplines. As the book demonstrates, anthropological approaches require slow, arduous work, and embedding within any community—but perhaps especially an online, amorphous, and in many ways invisible one like Anonymous—can be emotionally draining and ethically delicate. Coleman’s deliberate decision to keep herself away from illegal activity or even discussions of illegal activity protected her from both legal and reputational jeopardy, but at the cost of observing what is one of the most intriguing aspects of the Anonymous model: breaking the law in the name of a higher moral good. That being said, it’s hard to argue with her decision here.

Coleman’s reflections as a researcher embedded in this underground digital world are interspersed throughout the book, providing insights into her process. She describes her experience as “the quintessential anthropological life cycle—the alienation of initial entry, followed by the thrill of finding your footing, and the painful end of extraction” (p. 177). Her description of her 2010 family holidays will strike a chord with anyone who has struggled to explain to their loved ones just exactly what is so engrossing about their work: “I was witnessing the first large-scale, populist, full-bodied online protest, and I was not going to miss it for the world, *especially not for the Settlers of Catan*” (p. 129).

As an early-career scholar preparing for an ethnographic dive into Internet research, I found the first-person style and frank descriptions of the highs and lows of online ethnography both compelling and instructive, and this book should be required reading for any budding Internet ethnographer.

As Cory Doctorow noted in his review for *The Spectator*, the strength of *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* is not “computer security, or youthful alienation, or political activism,” but its treatment of the culture of Anonymous. The concepts and practices that are central to understanding Anonymous—and much of Internet culture—are antithetical to norms of offline polite society, such as “trolling,” “the lulz,” and “moralfaggotry.” For most people who didn’t grow up in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) chatrooms and were socialized into mainstream norms of interpersonal interaction and respect for others, the concept of “the lulz” will probably seem rather juvenile, and “moralfaggotry” a downright offensive concept, not least because of the homophobic slur at the root of the word.

Coleman defines the lulz as “a spirited but malevolent brand of humor etymologically derived from lol (Internet shorthand for Laughing Out Loud)” (p. 4), drawing erudite connections to the trickster of folklore. For Coleman, lulz “is a quintessential example of what folklorist define as argot—specialized and esoteric terminology used by a subcultural group” that “functions to enact secrecy or, at minimum, erect some very stiff social boundaries” (p. 31). Lulz mostly happen at someone else’s expense, priding itself on transgressing norms of good taste and political correctness.

The aforementioned “moralfaggotry” is an insult lobbed at one subset of Anons by strict partisans of the lulz who reject any concessions to mainstream morality. The “fag” suffix harks back to 4chan, “where it is both an insult and a term of endearment” (p. 42).

This is not the only area where the Anonymous subculture diverges from mainstream society. Anonymous rejects any kind of fame-seeking behavior, elevating “the self-effacement of the individual” instead (p. 47), in stark contrast to the culture of physical space. Another key concept is “doxxing” (the term derives from the word “documents”), or publishing someone’s personal information online without permission. This threat is especially potent when you consider that the whole point of Anonymous is to be, well, nameless.

One of the common critiques of *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* is its lack of emphasis on the gendered dimensions of online speech and harassment, vividly and often disturbingly exemplified by the recent “Gamergate” controversy. While it is true that gender is not the primary focus of this book, Coleman hardly ignores the issue. Of the hacker scene, she writes: “The white male-dominant scene, with some hackers especially prone to acting out elitist cowboy bravado, is alienating and repellent to many” (pp. 330-331). For example, she asks: “Why, for instance, are gender benders, queer hackers, and female trolls common and openly accepted categories, but female participation in technical circles remains low?” (p. 175).

Nor is gender the only aspect of Anonymous culture that Coleman identifies as problematic. While Coleman shows a genuine appreciation for lulzy kinds of humor, she acknowledges that “Lulz are darker [than lols]: acquired most often at someone’s expense, prone to misfiring and, occasionally, bordering on disturbing or hateful speech (except, of course, when they cross the border entirely: thank you rape jokes)” (p. 31). Likewise, in describing a particularly tasteless episode when a handful of Anons hacked an epilepsy forum and inserted flashing lights designed to cause seizures in the site’s visitors, Coleman doesn’t mince her words, calling it “one of the most most morally reprehensible and notorious attacks to date” (p. 69).

Stylistically, the book accomplishes the tour-de-force of fusing scholarly erudition with an appropriately lush way with words. For example, Coleman describes LOIC, a tool for coordinating DDoS attacks, as “about as safe as a torn condom” (p. 134). She recalls the moment when the Anons whose conversations she had been listening in on noticed her presence: “Suddenly it was as if the lidless eye of Sauron had swiveled his gaze to my corner of the room, melting the shadows I hid behind and bathing me in a fierce beam of light” (p. 179). Such moments of literary levity are especially welcome in a dense volume depicting such weighty events.

The book flows well from one chapter to the next, yet each chapter stands on its own as depictions of specific events from the Anonymous point of view. Readers studying Scientology, WikiLeaks, the Arab Spring, and more would do well to consult the relevant chapters. The self-contained nature of most of the chapters makes them well-suited for assignment as class readings. That said, the last chapter will be rather impenetrable to readers who do not already have deep knowledge of the Internet freedom space and its colorful cast of characters: Sabu, Jeremy Hammond, Barrett Brown, Quinn Norton, Aaron Swartz, Kim Dotcom, Brian Knappenberger, Julian Assange, and Jacob Applebaum—in no particular order—all make appearances in this maze of a chapter. What the chapter does, though, is draw connections between these disparate actors and illuminate the secret, online history behind the headlines. As such, the book is an essential primer for anyone studying or working in the Internet freedom space.

Finally, the book is rife with anecdotes that support the paranoid instincts of what one might call the “tin foil hat” contingent, already vindicated by the Edward Snowden revelations: Sabu tries several times to persuade Coleman to put him (and his FBI handlers) in touch with Tor developer and WikiLeaks associate Applebaum, living in self-imposed exile in Berlin. During his time as an informant, Sabu interacted with Assange and with WikiLeaks associate Soggi Thordarson, who also turned out to be an FBI informant. In the conclusion, written after the Snowden revelations, Coleman writes:

Such aggressive and wide-ranging forms of surveillance preemptively decimate the possibility of a “right to be left alone,” to use the famous 1890 phrasing of Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, who were among the first to consider the legal basis of privacy. And the style of surveillance employed today strikes not only at the personal, exploratory private sphere deemed valuable in liberal subject formation—it also preempts many forms of association that are essential to democratic life. (p. 379)

Coleman thus makes a strong case for Anonymous’ “decentralized and online character” making it more resilient to government efforts to stifle dissent, in contrast to the Occupy movement which was all but stomped out by a “repressive crackdown” involving “most every law enforcement entity” (pp. 333–334). While palpably troubled by the state of affairs, and noting that “the sanctioned channels for political change in the United States are frighteningly narrow,” Coleman insists that “a field which had seemed hopelessly desolate now resembles fertile terrain” as “the politically engaged geek family continues to grow—in size and in political significance.” She adds, “Never before have so many geeks and hackers wielded their keyboards for the sake of political expression, dissent, and direct action” (pp. 381–382).

Coleman more than accomplishes her twin goals of correcting inaccurate impressions about Anonymous and of “enhancing enchantment” (p. 394), and while she couldn’t have anticipated it when she first dove down the Anonymous rabbit hole, she has also written a powerful first-person account of the early days of the global Internet freedom movement.

References

Doctorow, C. (2014, November 22). What real hacker work looks like (and what it takes to find out). *The Spectator*. Retrieved from <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/9373852/the-anonymous-ghost-in-the-machine/>