From Indymedia to Anonymous: rethinking action and identity in digital cultures

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Beyond collective identity and networks
The period following the mobilizations of 2011 – the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street – has seen a new focus on the relationship between emerging practices of digital communications and emerging forms of collaborative action or movement. This has prompted new disciplinary encounters, as scholars working on social movements and collective action have begun to focus much more on the significance of communication processes. Within dominant approaches to social movement studies this represents a significant shift, to that the extent that the study of social movements has historically not attached a great significance to communication processes, which have been essentially understood within a 'broadcasting' paradigm, where collective actors 'display' their 'worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment' (Guini, McAdam & Tilly, 1999), principally by 'occupy[ing] public space… to disrupt routines and gain media attention' (Tilly & Tarrow, 2005 p.

20). This approach to social mobilization underlined the critical importance of 'the shared definition of a group' (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 105), understanding the cultural processes within collective action as 'identity work', the process whereby 'personal and collective identities are aligned' (Snow, 2000, p. 46), in an approach indebted to studies of identity transformation associated with religious conversion (Snow & Machalek, 1984). From this perspective, collective action can only take place when a collective identity has been constructed: 'Collective action cannot occur in the absence of a 'we' characterised by *common traits* and specific solidarity.... A collective actor cannot exist without reference to experiences, symbols and myths which form the basis of *its individuality* (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 87, p. 92, emphasis added).

This identity-centred approach to collective action (Larana et al, 1994) reflected a shift from an earlier emphasis on organizations and bureaucracy (Mc Carthy & Zald, 1977). This reflected broader social transformations, as societies increasingly came to understand themselves as made up of communities, each with its own culture, with 'identity' a community's resource to mobilise when attempting to enter the political system (Berbrier, 2002). As such, 'identity' not only offered a theory of community, but also agency: 'actors take action in the name of identities' (McAdam et al, 2001, p. 137). These transformations were most pronounced in the United States, and it is not surprising that is here we encounter the rapid growth of the social scientific use of 'identity', drawing on American 'national character studies' undertaken during the Second World War which had initially aimed at understanding the 'national character', or collective culture, of America's wartime opponents (Gleason, 1983).

Today the increasing importance of digitally mediated action is putting into question the previous centrality accorded to 'collective identity'. Many scholars highlight the increasing distance between individuals and older, more fixed, forms of social solidarity such as mass-based organizations, political parties, churches or trade unions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Others, focusing on patterns of action evident in the global justice movement that emerged in Seattle in 1999, argued that older forms of solidarity (where organizations act through

their members, via structures of delegation and representation) are giving way to new forms of fluidarity (McDonald, 2002) where personal experience was becoming so central to collective action that previous forms of 'social movement' were giving way to new forms of 'experience movement' (McDonald, 2006). Others strongly rejected such claims, arguing that it was 'far too simplistic … to insist that a radical transformation of collective action has actually taken place', arguing instead for the continuing centrality of 'organizations and organizational identities' (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 132).

Practices associated with digital communications are central to this debate. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of such practices by contrasting the emergence in 1999 of Indymedia, a collaboration that played an important role in the emergence of the idea of 'network of networks', with the birth in 2008 of Anonymous, in a campaign against the Church of Scientology. Both were internet-based collaborations, however they took very different form. Indymedia emerged out of pre-existing solidarity networks around the Zapatista movement in Mexico, taking on global significance with the 1999 Seattle mobilization and subsequent global justice movement (McDonald, 2006). Anonymous became internationally known during 2010 for its Distributed Denial of Service actions against MasterCard and PayPal in support of Wikileaks, in 2011 undertaking similar actions against Tunisian government websites in support of democracy movements. However unlike Indymedia, Anonymous did not emerge out of activist cultures and networks, but originated in the grotesque and pornographic /b/ board of 4chan, a chaotic image based bulletin board with a significant impact in Internet culture.

This difference is important to understand, because of the extent that Indymedia has come to be associated with a number of propositions that have had a major impact well beyond social movement studies, in particular the idea of a 'network of networks' and the associated understanding of action as 'networking practice' (Juris, 2005, p. 193). This centrality of network as structure, or what Castells calls 'the predominance of social morphology over social action' (1996, p. 469), has had a significant legacy in attempts to rethink action. We can see this in the

'connective action' thesis proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2013), where to a significant extent the 'personal' is located within a theory of action understood as 'digital networking' (2013, p. 35). The emergence of Anonymous highlights dimensions in contemporary action that *widen our understandings of digital cultures and agency, and hence reduce the importance of networks as structure*. Rather than approach 'personalised action' in terms of 'lifestyle elements' and 'individuals' own narratives' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 770), this paper sets out to explore forms of mobilization that point to the contours of power and selfhood in emerging digital societies.

Movements/Information/Communications

If North American social life in the 1980s came to be shaped by community cultures and a corresponding language of identity (Gleason, 1983), this dynamic did not shape all approaches to communication within social movement studies. In Europe the French sociologist Alain Touraine argued that an industrial society was giving way to a new postindustrial society, with social power shifting from the control of industrial production to the control of systems of communication and information, evident in their capacity to 'programme' social life (Touraine, 1971, p. 4). Along similar lines, Alberto Melucci argued that a 'new societal type based on information' was emerging, where increasingly invasive forms of power are based on 'symbols and language increasingly controlled by media and by actors creating and spreading shared cultural models' (Melucci, 2000, p. 9). For Touraine and Melucci, communication was not simply an instrument of action, but a field of power and conflict. Both underlined the importance of new structures of communication and information to the constitution of personal subjectivity, with emerging forms of power not only shaping politics and economics, but also the very possibility of successfully constructing oneself as an individual (Melucci, 2000, p. 39), something both came to place at the centre of social life and conflicts (Touraine, 2002).

Critically, neither Melucci nor Touraine approached 'identity' as the culture of a community. For Touraine, identity is a field of tensions, dilemmas, and creativity. The workers' movement was at the centre of Touraine's early work, centred

around what he called 'workers' consciousness'. This was not an expression of common traits. Instead he explores the tension between what he called the 'two sides' of identity. On the one hand, a 'proletarian' identity associated with an experience of deskilled work, where the worker finds themselves dispossessed of creativity, and generating actions ranging from disengagement to sabotage, all characterised by the theme of rupture. On the other hand, Touraine highlights an identity he associates with the experience of skilled workers, for whom work involves creativity and autonomy, and who develop forms of action that may become easily absorbed into systems of 'market unionism'. These 'two sides of identity' (Touraine, 1984) represent social creativity and an experience of suffering, both made possible by industrial culture and social organization. Touraine argues that a social movement of workers is created when these two sides of identity transform each other in the context of social conflicts. This synthesis leads to a social movement of workers, able to affirm the value and creativity of work, while at the same time contesting the forms of work organization that would strip the worker of their creativity (McDonald, 2002). A similar focus on tensions was central to the work of Melucci, but lived at the level of personal embodied subjectivity (1984).

The legacy of Indymedia: networking practices
These earlier analyses of Touraine and Melucci prefigure later work within social movement studies around communicative practices. The key shift here is a move away from a focus on organizations and communities to a new attention to transformations explored in terms of a shift from 'collective' to 'connective' action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), or as grounded in 'mass-self communication' (Castells, 2007). These approaches highlight the 'personalisation' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) or the 'individualisation' (Castells, 2007) of social life, attaching a decisive importance to the role of digital technologies in this transformation. Bennett and Segerberg underline 'digitally networked action' (DNA), arguing digital technologies offer the technological basis for collaboration between people who no longer need organizations or strong symbolic communities to connect (2011, 743).

The Independent Media Centres played a key role in this shift in focus. For several years (Pickard, 2006) the IMCs established themselves as a distinctive dimension of what came to be known as the global justice movement (McDonald, 2006). The first IMCs emerged out of solidarity networks supporting the 1994 Zapatista uprising, originally using faxed newsfeeds and later shifting to listserv networks (Russell, 2001). The IMCs embraced a culture of 'citizen journalism' around the theme of 'don't hate the media, be the media', claiming the mantle of a new type of 'media activism'. A key technological innovation making the IMCs possible was new 'open publishing' computer codes that promised collaborative uploading and editing of websites. The early IMCs were equally sustained by a culture of DIY activism and a culture of simultaneity, evident in 'global days' of action and an emerging upload culture (McDonald, 2006). All this came to shape an emerging utopia of a 'network of networks' (Cleaver, 1997).

Castells argued these transformations prefigured an 'information age' structured as a 'network society' (Castells, 1996). For Jeffrey Juris the Internet offered a 'horizontal networking logic', providing not only a platform for social movement organizing, but also a 'broader model for creating alternative forms of social, political, and economic organization', making possible a new type of 'computer supported social movement' (2005, p. 191). For Juris, 'open source' was a metaphor capable of inspiring 'post-capitalist forms of political and social organization at local, regional, and global scales' (Juris, 2005, p. 191). For Geert Lovink, ideas were becoming 'hardwired into software and network architectures' (2002), making it possible to 'reverse engineer freedom', as new computing architectures prompted a 'search for radically new modes of connectivity that indicate a forthcoming revolution' (Lovink & Schneider, p. 2003). This optimism was taken up in the influential thesis of 'multitudes' proposed by Hardt and Negri, who speak of 'an open-source society' as 'a society whose source code is revealed so that we can work collaboratively to solve its bugs and create new, better social programs' (2004, p. 340), a conception of social change modelled on the collaborative practices involved in writing and debugging computer code (Coleman, 2013).

Information networks have established themselves as central to attempts to understand collective action. Significantly, such transformations are often framed within an imaginary of technological determinism: 'once introduced, and powered by information technology, information networks through competition, gradually eliminate other organizational forms rooted in a different social logic. In this sense, they tend to assert the predominance of social morphology over social action' (Castells, 2000, p. 16-17). From this perspective, action manifests a series of 'broad guiding principles' which, 'shaped by the logic of informational capitalism… are internalized by activists and generate concrete networking practices' (Juris, 2005, pp. 192-193). Paradoxically, the triumph of information networks in such analyses tends to eclipse actual communicative practices, which become reduced to 'networking practices'. In the 20th century trade unions built hierarchical organizations based on representation and delegation to further their shared goals, but their action would never have been referred to as 'hierarching practices'.

Digital culture and 4chan: the ephemeral, trolling and lulz
Anonymous emerges *within digital culture*, confronting us with questions and practices that underline the importance of rethinking the relationship between individual and shared experiences of agency. To explore these questions, I wish to consider the emergence of Anonymous on the manga message board 4Chan.org in the period leading up to its action against the Church of Scientology in 2008. For Whitehead and Wesch, Anonymous involves a 'challenge to individualism and identity [that] represent(s) a new form of political engagement and resistance' (2012, p. 6). This is a strong claim, but without doubt the development of Anonymous confronts us with questions about contemporary forms of agency elided within metaphors such as 'network of networks' or 'networking practice'. Among these are the culture of the ephemeral, the meaning of *lulz*, the significance of the mask, and important dimensions of internet culture such as trolling and the production of memes.

4chan.org is a message board based manga site created by a 15-year old in New York City in 2003 (Olson 2012, Coleman 2014). The culture of the board was,

and is, one of breaking limits, the grotesque, pornographic images, ironic humour, memes, trolling and *lulz*. Most public libraries and workplaces block access to this site on the grounds that it is pornographic and not fit to be displayed on a computer in a public place. 4chan is not a minor phenomenon on the Internet. From early on it received over 20 million visitors per month, averaging some 35,000 posts per day (Bernstein et al, p. 2011). At the time of writing it counted over 1.7 billion individual posts (4chan.org, accessed February 25 2015). 4chan's chaotic, raucous pages are organised in terms of over 60 boards around particular interests, from video (/v/ board) or fashion (/fa/ board) to the politically incorrect (/pol/board) or the paranormal (/x/ board). Its board dedicated to 'random' posts, /b/, (/boards.4chan.org/b/) has been a significant generator of internet culture. Lolcats, for example, emerged on the site some time in 2006 out of 'Caturday', a day where 4chan users would post humorous images of cats (Gawne & Vaughn, 2011). All posts to 4chan are by default anonymous, and posts and threads only remain displayed if 'bumped' by another user. The constant stream of new posts to any of 4chan's boards mean that posts quickly drop to the bottom of the page, and after 15 pages they cannot be retrieved (Bernestin et al, 2011). Contrasted with a site like Facebook, which functions as an archive, 4chan has had from its beginning a culture of the ephemeral - communication is fragile to the extent if no one responds to a post, no trace of it remains. The ephemeral nature of posts combined with their anonymity confronts the users of boards with a question of meaning – how does a board create a sense of shared experience, something that extends beyond the brief period that individual posts are present? Anonymity, combined with the ephemeral nature of posts, generates a dynamic of competition for the limited resource of attention: a driver of excess and the extreme.

As widely observed, the production of *lulz* is central to the communicative practices we encounter on 4chan's /b/ board. Lulz is a 'deviant style of humour and a quasi-mystical state of being' (Coleman, 2014, p. 2). The term is a corruption of LOL (Laugh Out Loud), first coined in the Encyclopedia Dramatica, a website linked to 4chan, in 2001 (Coleman, 2014, p. 30). As a form of humour, Coleman notes that lulz is similar to argot, a 'specialised and esoteric

terminology used by a subcultural group', (2014, p. 31) while it is also a form of cruelty, 'laughter at the expense of the misfortune of others'. Lulz is a type of humour that combines irony and critique (Milner, 2012, p. 62), a form of pleasure closely associated with trolling, a practice that is at the centre of the interactions making up /b/. It is important to note that trolling is not simple abuse or hate speech. Trolling is a practice that seeks to disrupt, through apparently stupid and humorous questions. However for those who share the necessary knowledge, these disruptive activities are steeped in irony. For Whitney Phillips, trolls are 'agents of cultural digestion [who] scavenge the landscape, re-purpose the most exploitable material, then shove the resulting monstrosities into the faces of an unsuspecting populace' (Phillips, 2014 accessed 11 Oct 2014).

For Gabriella Coleman, trolling can be understood as a practice similar to the role played by the 'trickster' in premodern societies: defying rules, propelled by curiosity and excess appetite, spontaneous and unpredictable. For Coleman, it is the trickster who uncovers and disrupts 'the very thing that cultures are based on' (2014, p. 34). While anthropology alerts us to the way today's trolls evoke the action of the trickster, trolling is more than this. Trolling is a form of action that seeks to trick the person being trolled into revealing a hidden reality. The aim of trolling is to provoke a reaction that is not one of simple frustration or anger, but a *reaction that reveals a truth* that the person reacting is either concealing, or may not even be aware of. In that sense, it is a particularly contemporary form of action, one that shares something with wider cultures of the hidden and the revealed that abound on the internet, such as conspiracy theory. This is central, for example, to Wikileak's Julian Assange (2006), who considers that conspiracy has become the principle form of governance in contemporary societies. This captures a significant mutation in contemporary democracy, one where 'transparency... has become the paramount virtue in an uncertain world' (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 258).

As well as trolling, 4chan has been a prodigious generator of 'memes'. These are incongruent combinations of image and text, often working through humour,

generating impact through strangeness. It is often argued that 'memes' are a form of self-replicating object, drawing on Richard Dawkins' (1989) influential proposition that memes are cultural forms that replicate themselves in a way similar to genes. But this structural approach mirroring genetics does not capture the extent to which those involved in creating memes are self-consciously aware of what they are doing. From this perspective, people are less the vectors of the transmission of memes than the actors (Shifman, 2013). Memes are a cultural project as much as object, and their production is a form of social interaction – as material for iteration, parody, or satire, they become 'raw material for creativity', typifying 'the shift from a culture of consumption to one of production' (Marwick, 2013).

One of the critical dimensions to understand in relation to 4chan, and which helps us understand the importance of memes, is the ephemeral nature of its posts. On the one hand this is the result of the massive amount of material being posted. But is also a direct consequence of 4chan's architecture. For a post to survive, it requires a fast and frequent response. Bernstein et al observe that the deletion of content may push users to 'iterate and generate' memes, through downloading content before it disappears, remixing it and reposting later (2011 54). The meme is a form of memory that allows recognition. It evokes, but at the same time transforms, what has gone before. Users of 4chan experience an environment made up of multiple simultaneous threads and posts, meaning that the experience of the site is one of *contingency* (Knuttila, 2012). In that sense, as Coleman (2009) argues, the meme is something that connects across contingency. Through its circulation, the meme connects 'a group of people which are otherwise dispersed and unconnected' (2009). As such, rather than being a form of self-replicating cultural object as Dawkins contends, the meme is 'a type of consistent recollection overcoming the gulf created by anonymity and temporality. They constantly return to act as a pillar of familiarity, standing against the stream of posts and responses. The meme moves against the unexpected' (Knuttila, 2012, p. 8). In that sense the meme is both 'a reaction to, and embodiment of, contingency' (Coleman, 2009). The production and circulation of memes is critical to digital culture, standing outside the binary of

individual versus collective. Similar to memory practices emerging around the circulation of digital photography, the production of memes can be understood as not 'private or public, but as a syncing of memories… and a tagging of emotional connections' (Garde-Hansen, 2013, p. 89).

Trolling as internet-based collaboration

Anonymous emerges out of pre-existing internet collaborations, the most important of these being online gaming. In July 2006 an action that would serve as a precursor for Anonymous was the 'occupation' of the Habbo Hotel game, a virtual chat room for younger teenagers. Some 150 people from 4chan 'raided' the game using African American avatars wearing suits, loafers and Afro haircuts. The aim was to block players accessing the entrance to the hotel's virtual pool, in so doing preventing a 'contagion of AIDS' (Holmes, 2013, p. 159). As an event, the Habbo raid led to the production of memes and other forms of 'memorabilia', such as 'pool's closed' and to the smartly suited figure that would later morph into images of Anonymous. The justification for the raid was a suggestion circulating on 4chan that Habbo's moderators were pursuing policies of excluding black people. Holmes observes that the reasons for occupying this game rather than others are flimsy, to the extent that many other games have a much more clearly overt racist structure (in many games, for example, sub-human species are frequently racialised as non-Caucasian).

Gamers refer to disrupting a game in this way as 'griefing'. Bakioglu (2009) explores this practice, distinguishing between grief play (playing with the purpose of annoying others) and griefing, which he suggests consists of 'disruptive cultural activities' that have the effect of 'jamming the world's signification system'. From this perspective, the game is an emergent assemblage constructed by a wide range of actors and technologies, a 'play moment' in which disruption takes the form of generating 'nonsense' (Bakioglu, 2009). The practice of users of 4chan raiding online game-worlds widened following the raid on Habbo Hotel to include raids on World of Warcraft and Second Life. Higgin explores a 'raid' on the World of Warcraft where some 200 people from 4chan create black avatars and enter the Word as slaves that are

marched to an auction house – the shock value of the raid highlighting the absence of non-white people in this virtual world. For Higgin, these raids have a transformative dimension, to the extent that they detrritorialise gamespace (the territorial integrity and coherence of the space is ruptured by the irruption of the slaves marching to auction), while at the same time succeeding in reterritorializing it through putting at its centre an aspect that has been displaced – blackness (2012, p. 180). Such action contests the depoliticization built into the structure of this video game: 'the black bodies destabilize and assault the dominance of whiteness, even as they cloak themselves in racist trolling' (2012, p. 192). From this perspective, 'raids infiltrate space, transform it, and challenge the audience… [in a way] similar to performance art' (2012, p. 194).

In December of 2006 the practice of 'raiding' left the virtual space of gaming to target a White Supremacist internet radio run by Hal Turner. The raid involved prank calls, pizza deliveries, and following a hostile response from Turner, action that would become a signature of Anonymous, a Distributed Denial of Service. This action involves many people simultaneous directing downloaded stress test programmes to a website in order to bring about the collapse of its server through overload. Participating in such action is not 'hacking', and as Sauter (2013) observes, does not require advanced computer skills. This initial raid on Turner's website, and the response it evoked, led to similar 'raids' on other white supremacist websites.

Project Chanology
Anonymous emerged out of such a 4chan DDoS 'raid' undertaken against the Church of Scientology in 2008. This raid was prompted when Scientology removed a leaked video featuring Tom Cruise that had been posted to the web, in which Cruise speaks of the special powers and responsibilities possessed by Scientologists. The initial discussions on 4chan regarding whether to take action against Scientology are deeply embedded within the imaginary of raids that had been developed since what had by then come to be know as the 'Great Habbo Raid'. Confronted by Scientology's action, posters on 4chan affirm the need to

'do something big', to 'take down' Scientology (by which they mean block access to its websites). Using posts retrieved from 4chanarchive.org, we can reconstruct the debate about how to respond to this action. An initial post appealed to users of the /b/ board:

> *'I think it's time for /b/ to do something big…. I'm talking about 'hacking' or*
> *'taking down' the official Scientology website. It's time to use our resources*
> *to do something we believe is right'* (15 Jan 2008).

Throughout the following days, as the campaign gains momentum, the language more explicitly comes to evoke a video game:

> *'On 51/1/08 war was beginning. Scientology's site is already under heavy*
> *bombardment, it's loading quite slowly. (….) 4chan, answer the call. Join the*
> *legion against Scientology, help in its demise, in its long awaited doom.'*

> *'Without the united support of the chans, Scientology will brush off this*
> *attack… do the right thing 4chan, become not just a part of this war,*
> *become an epic part of it. The largest of the chans, you hold the key of*
> *manpower, what the legion is in desperate need of. FORWARD*
> *ANONYMOUS! UNITED, WE, THE LEGION, ARE UNSTOPPABLE! Tl.dr [Too*
> *long; didn't read] we're taking down Scientology, join up or gtfo.'*

Within a week, posters to /b/ were discussing the motivation for this action. In response to the call to 'do something we believe is right', others reject the imagery of 'freedom fighter':

> *'Anon is not your personal freedom fighter. Anon does not fight for human*
> *rights.' 'We're supposed to be doing it for the lulz. Nothing more, nothing*
> *less.'*

Linked to this is the fear that a form of collective action could lead to the creation of leaders (leaderfags), organization and identity:

> *'By all means raid the shit out of CoS if you want cause I don't care less as*
> *long as it is for the lulz. But trying to organize anon into an ongoing fight*
> *against any ideal is the cancer killing anon.*

We are not supposed to be some internet paladin [characters in World of Warcraft who can withstand blows while helping the injured in battle]. We are not supposed to be attention whores. We are supposed to be in the shadows. Now everyone is happy about showing up on the tv and shit. What is wrong with anon. Wake up before we become emo corner.

A significant change occurs when some participants post a video, *Message to Scientology*, to YouTube on 21 January (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ). The video evokes stark clouds over a desolate urban scape, while a computer-generated voice delivers a message that begins 'Hello Scientology. We are Anonymous'. The disembodied voice goes on to condemn Scientology for its 'misinformation', its 'suppression of dissent', its 'litigious nature', and its hypocrisy, and promises to expel Scientology 'from the Internet' and in the process to 'dismantle' it – 'for the good of its members, for the good of society', and 'for our own enjoyment'. This video prompted extensive debate on 4chan revealing significant tensions. One cluster of posters are dismayed:

'Anonymous as an organization? Lol just look what you people have done. You newfags [new to 4chan] never knew what an anonymous attitude is. Instead you created and (sic) Anonymous IDENTITY, because deep in you, you are all attention-whores with a strong desire to be lold about' (27 Jan 2008).

GTFO. GET BACK TO BEING VULGAR, MEAN, AND CRUEL. GET BACK TO BEING ANONYMOUS.

Responding to this, evoking the 'pool's closed' meme, others mobilise the memory of previous 'raids', in particular that against the Habbo Hotel:

'All you losers who have no achievement to their name, THIS IS YOUR CHANCE! You could be part of something big. If we make enough headway into the raid, eventually mainstream media and the public will join us. If Scientology is eradicated, it will because we had the balls to stand up to

them. So stop being a dipshit, and don your afros and suits. Scientology is closed, and we need all the help we can get to keep the AIDS contained'.

Others however evoke previous raids to warn of the dangers involved seeking to speak on behalf of others. One responds to 'interviews with Anonymous' appearing in different media:

'You idiots make me sick. The people who took down Hal Turner would never have stood for this kind of shit. No single voice represents Anonymous, no organization supports Anonymous, nobody, nothing on this planet is in favour of Anonymous. We were the bane of the internet, and even we took Hal fucking Turner down, what little shit scum he was, people hated us for it.

We did it because it was funny, Anonymous. Because they pissed us off. Everyone pisses us off. Everyone pretends to be better than they are. We chose victims based on who would squirm the most when we wrung their necks like the worthless mockingbirds they were.'

As this debate advances, more evocative imaginaries of action become present, drawing again on the world of gaming:

'[Scientology's] only method of fighting [legal action against individuals or organizations] is unable to affect Anonymous in any way, like taking on zerglings [small fast fighters in StarCraft II] with a ghost. We, the un-nameable, un-countable masses are the best weapon to be used against Scientology'.

Others construct imaginaries based on previous raids, this time evoking the mask:

'Picture it. A tall man in an afro and green mask, wearing a distinguished suit and standing behind a podium adorned with the symbol of Anonymous, speaking publicly against Scientology... all through a voice emulator. Lulz AND power.

It is at this point in the action against Scientology that the possibility of being both visible and invisible becomes increasingly present in posts, evoked by the imaginary of the mask.
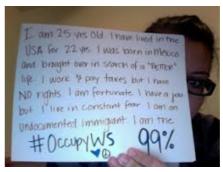
Masks and digital collaborations: from MadV to 'I am the 99%'

The mask has become an increasing part of social life over recent years. As a form of social practice, masking is not principally a means to conceal an identity, it is associated with a *transformation* from one state to another. In many contexts, masking is also associated with accessing a form of power. In all of these, the mask is the mediation that allows the transformation to occur, a 'metaphor in action' (Tonkin, 1979). The mask is at the same time an expression of paradox and ambiguity – the mask conceals, but it also reveals, it makes visible a new state, capacity or even being (Hojberg, 2001).

The mask emerges on 4chan well before the action against Scientology. The V-for-Vendetta mask now associated with Anonymous first emerged in 2006 with a small narrative series of images recounting the story of 'Epic Fail Guy', a stick figure illustration with no distinction and silent, who finds a Guy Fawkes mask at the bottom of a rubbish bin, and whose failures then become 'epic', becoming a meme in the process. Significantly, as participants begin to imagine the meanings of the action against Scientology, the mask they refer to is initially not the V-for-Vendetta, but a green mask, reflecting early visual representations of 4chan being a man wearing a suit, with no face, eyes or mouth, but a green head.

The first internet-based collaboration involving the V-for-Vendetta mask did not emerge on 4chan, but on YouTube in a series of short videos posted by MadV, a young man who performed illusionist tricks in his bedroom while wearing the mask. These generated a massive following. His 'One world' video, consisting of MadV presenting a message written on the palm of his hand while obscuring his face, prompted over 2,000 video responses that he went on to edit into the largest internet collaboration at that time (CollabDocs, 2010). It is significant that the visual structure of this image prefigures the visual structure of the 'I am 99%' campaign that would emerge some five years later on the Tumblr microblogging website:

Here we encounter the contours of a paradigm of communication. In both cases, we do not hear the voice of the person, but we receive a message. And while both are concealed, both are also visible.

The Occupy Wall Street tumblr blog demonstrates a type of communication. Each message recounts a personal experience, and ends with the assertion 'I am the 99%'. This is a significantly different claim from 'we are the 99%'. The founders of this blog sought this out from the beginning – they were not seeking people who would represent others. Instead, they were looking for stories that would capture 'specificity':

> They're not just 'indebted students', 'the uninsured', 'the foreclosed'. They're
> THIS indebted student, they're THIS uninsured person, they're THIS person
> whose home was foreclosed. Specificity has great power' (Weinstein 2011)

In the great majority of posts to this blog, the person's face is visible while also obscured. Their name is not offered. It is the act of communicating that constitutes the person in their singularity. He or she tells a story in the first person, and addresses the viewer. This type of communication highlights the ethical importance of the singular and the particular, foregrounding not an autonomous subject, but a subject that is both opaque and vulnerable, both being conditions of its singularity, expressed in the word 'I'.

You cannot assimilate us: the fragile and the grotesque
Both the 'I am the 99%' microblog and the emergence of Anonymous highlight forms of communication that cannot be captured within the vocabulary of 'networking practices'. The 'I am the 99%' microblog sets out to construct

singularity through the relationship between what is visible and what is not, this same dynamic is evident in Anonymous. As Anonymous became an idea as well as a form of action, the category of identity itself increasingly came to be put into question, also linked to the theme of fragility:

> *'Identity belongs only to those who are important. Those who have earned it by struggle and blood. Those who matter. You, my friend, do not. Identity is a fragile and weak thing. It can be stolen or replaced. Even forgotten. Identity is a pointless thing for people like us. So why not let it go and become Anonymous'* (Anon, 2010)

One way we can see identity being put into question is through a refusal of the norms that make social life possible:

> *'We are human nature unencumbered by pointless ethics, foolish moralities or arbitrary laws and restrictions. We are every dark impulse you have; unrestrained and fully realised. We are deep down what you wish you were. We exist as a means for instant gratification, purely at our own whim. We have no culture, we have no laws, written or otherwise. We are an autonomous collective, each an insignificant part of a whole. You cannot assimilate us, we do not change. You cannot defeat us, we do not exist'*
> (Anon 2010)
> http://www.topix.com/forum/city/bean-station-tn/T5P5E1JE2SQBHVSFF

This post captures an important dimension of the culture of the grotesque that is so much part of 4chan: its excess, its cruelty, its misogyny, its pleasure in transgression and its sense of humour. Here we are certainly not dealing with a culture of the 'horizontal network'. If anything, we encounter here a reverse image of Tilly's 'Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment'. Rather, we are much closer to what has been theorized as the grotesque, something 'inherently disruptive … that in its willful monstrosity it defies the symbolic order' (Andreescu & Shapiro, 2014, p. 54). This is certainly the logic evident in the griefer 'game raids' that have the effect of jamming the culture of a game.   In 4chan we encounter two dimensions of the grotesque – the carnival, but also the

uncanny (Russo, 1994, p. 8), and it is this second dimension that is the source of the creation of memes (the strangeness of the juxtapositions that make them up), while also serving as the 'undoer' of fixed identity (Kristeva, 1982, p. 208).

There is an imaginary of a kind of agency at work here:

> *Curiosity peaks within your mind, Obsessed with the urge to uncover and find... The identity of the unknown, the meaning of US, The power we gain from being Anonymous. You'll never hear us coming, yet our presence is always felt, Prying on opposers, watching their disbelief melt. Marching in anonymity together as one, Embracing the strength from the voice of none.*

Similar posts occur widely across Anonymous-related websites and discussion boards, capturing a type of imaginary at work. This is beyond a simple subculture, and can be considered a particular type of emancipatory imagination, one that is important to understand to the extent that it constructed without reference to the ideals we have come to recognize as emancipatory. Anreescu and Shapiro capture something similar when exploring the relationship between beauty and the grotesque:

> 'Embracing the grotesque is an act that differs from fantasy... because the act situates one outside the Other's law. For this reason, it is appropriate to consider [it] transgressive. The act does not articulate a demand – it is not a cry to the Other' (Anreescu & Shapiro, 2014, p. 55).

Contesting 'radical transparency'?

In the discussion above we encountered the work of Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci. Both argued that what was then called the 'information society' was based on a type of social power quite different to that of industrial society, and by implication, the types of social conflicts in the information society would be quite different from those of industrial capitalism. Both Anonymous and the *'I am the 99%'* Tumblr blog may be signaling this transformation at work. Anonymous is a product of digital culture, and while the *'I am the 99%'* Tumblr blog did not emerge within digital culture, it is shaped by its forms of

communication. These actions alert us to important transformations at work in contemporary social life around the question of 'transparency'.

One of the most significant attempts to structure digital life and culture around the principle of transparency is Facebook, in its demand that users provide a transparent identity. To the extent that Facebook is a data-mining platform that directs advertising to its billion plus users, transparency is critical to its commercial success, hence its search for increasingly detailed profiles about the books we read, the films we see, the places we travel. For Sheryl Sandberg, the company's Chief Operating Officer, transparency amounts to a 'shift to authenticity', one that will 'take getting used to and will elicit cries of lost privacy' (2012). Mark Zukerberg, Facebook's founder, considers achieving 'radical transparency' to be an ethical imperative, insisting that Facebook can become a global vehicle through which we lead more open, more transparent and less private lives. Zuckerberg explicitly refers to 'the world we're building', describing it as becoming increasingly transparent, where in the process, 'it becomes good for people to be good to each other' (in Smith, 2008).

Zuckerberg translates a cultural model of 'radical transparency' into practices of a 'single login' that will allow tracking across multiple platforms and make possible a utopia of individualized marketing based on individualized data mining. This social and cultural model shares the same core as the utopia of a 'data-driven life' evident in the Quantified Self movement, a movement focusing on self-improvement through a range of self-quantifying technologies, from emotion tracking to sleep and exercise monitoring, with the promise of a cloud-based 'extended exoself', where in the words of one of its proponents, 'once equipped with QS devices, an individual body becomes a knowable, calculable, and administrable object (Swan, 2012, p. 93). Zuckerberg's data driven economy and the Quantified Self's data-driven self may represent a core dimension of contemporary informational capitalism, because to transform the economy they seek to transform how we experience ourselves: they are constructing techno-cultural models of 'personalisation'. To this extent, Anonymous and Facebook represent two radically different approaches to digital social space, evoking

themes developed by Touraine when he proposes that societies are the product of systems of action built up around shared, but contested, core cultural orientations, in this case, practices of memory and selfhood associated with digital communications.

New agendas

Neither Anonymous nor *'I am the 99%'* correspond to the 'common traits' paradigm that established itself in social movement studies the 1990s (McDonald 2002). Rather than a 'shared definition of a group', we encounter much less stable practices of collaboration, and a cluster of practices framed in terms of masking, the ephemeral, contingency, creativity, temporality, and a refusal of fixed identity. This article has begun to explore such practices emerging in digital culture, and highlights future directions for research. If we want to move beyond a language of 'common traits' to achieve an understanding of the sociality of memes, for example, we need to place more complex processes of perception, anticipation, resonance (Connolly 2011) and embodied memory at the centre of our analysis. Such an engagement with digital culture is critical to understanding the complexity and conflictuality at stake in contemporary personalization, from the affect and ethics of connective memory to tensions within forms of agency such as the grotesque and trolling. What we are encountering here may not be 'social movements', but they are forms of digital collaboration that cannot be understood if reduced to 'networking practices'. Instead, they point to significant reconfigurations of human sociality (Whitehead & Wesch, 2012). The practices and cultures emerging in digital spaces –masking, visibility, opacity, singularity, the ephemeral, contingency, and the grotesque - are of decisive importance both to renewing the study of collective action and to the study of power and conflict in digital societies. They are also increasingly central to the pleasures and risks of doing things together.

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