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# Hacktivism against Terrorism: A Cultural Criminological Analysis of Anonymous' Anti-IS Campaigns

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## Abstract

*This article uses a cultural criminology approach to examine cyber campaigns waged by the hacker collective, Anonymous, against the jihadist organization, Islamic State (IS). Employing Jeff Ferrell and Mike Presdee's theory as a conceptual framework, it examines how Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns have been constructed and shaped by characteristics of the late-modern mediascape, including its affordances for carnivalesque transgression, reflexive media, and crowd-sourced politicization. Through reference to key statements and actions made by Anonymous immediately following IS-related attacks in Paris during 2015, our analysis examines high profile social and video media produced by the hacktivist collective, and relevant commentary from news media, experts, and industry representatives. With its focus on resistance and the 'politics of meaning', we argue that cultural criminology has much to offer in unpacking the emotional appeal, craft, public identity, and social representations of Anonymous as a hacktivist collective.*

Keywords: Anonymous, Islamic State, terrorism, hacktivism, social media, Twitter, crowd-sourcing.

## Introduction

The jihadist organization, 'Islamic State' (IS), used social media extensively for propagandizing, fundraising, and recruitment following its declaration of a Syrian and Iraqi Caliphate on 29 June 2014. From this date forward, IS disseminated hi-tech textual and audiovisual media over twenty-first century social media platforms, including Telegram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter. Authorities have observed that with respect to the volume and professionalism of its online messaging, IS is 'unrivalled' in comparison to other politically violent organizations (Lister, 2014).

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Sophisticated IS media efforts include its development of Arabic-language Android applications, such as the now-defunct 2014 *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* program, which automatically re-tweeted pro-IS links, hashtags and images to user accounts. Other efforts include the IS-funded *Amaq News Agency*, which broadcasts propagandized accounts of IS battles, and the organization's establishment of more than 30 media offices that publish propaganda in dozens of international languages. IS's online presence, sometimes referred to as a 'digital caliphate' (Atwan, 2015), has been instrumental in the organization's recruitment and garnering of sponsorship. Correspondingly, this presence has been a strategic target for government and non-government entities. The disaggregate hacker collective, Anonymous, is one such entity that has been met with varying degrees of support and opposition from cyber security experts, governments, and academics, for its actions against IS.

Through a cultural criminological framework, this article examines how Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns have been constructed and shaped by characteristics of the late-modern mediascape, including its affordances for carnivalesque transgression, feature of recursive and cyclically referential, 'reflexive' media, and incorporation of crowd-sourced politicization. Focusing on key statements and actions made by Anonymous immediately following IS-related events in Paris during 2015, our analysis examines high profile social and video media produced by the hacktivist collective and relevant commentary from news media, experts, and industry representatives.

## Background

With its sensitivity to the role of meaning, affect, and the politics of crime and criminal justice, cultural criminology provides a fertile perspective for examining counterterrorism. Indeed, one of the chief architects of cultural criminology, Keith Hayward (2011; 2016), has observed the theoretical and epistemological congruence between cultural criminology and critical terrorism studies (see also Jackson, 2007), and has called for additional dialogue between the two sub-disciplines. Both cultural criminology and critical terrorism studies, as Hayward (2011) recognizes, share an interest in inter-disciplinarity and a desire for intellectual pluralism. For the purposes of this article, it is also pertinent to note that both begin from the premise that knowledge production is never apolitical.

Cultural criminology is, as Yar (2018) notes, a perspective that has enormous potential for examining transgressive online subcultures, and the circulation of meaning online. Although cultural criminological approaches have previously been adopted to analyze activist groups (Naegler, 2012; Brisman & South, 2013; Seal, 2013), hacking (Steinmetz, 2016), and terrorism (Hamm, 2004; Cottee and Hayward 2011), scholarship from this perspective has yet to examine the convergence of these phenomena, as exemplified by Anonymous' hacktivism, in a rigorous fashion. Through an examination of Anonymous' anti-IS social media campaigns, coordinated via the hashtags #OpISIS, #OpCharlieHebdo and #OpParis, we suggest that the theoretical precepts of cultural criminology offer a productive lens for delineating their affective style, dimensions, and efficacy, in culturally mediated settings. With its focus on resistance and the 'politics of meaning' (Ferrell 2013), cultural criminology has much to offer in unpacking the public identity and social representations of hacktivist collectives such as Anonymous, as well as their emotional appeal, and the craft of politically-driven hacking itself (see Steinmetz, 2016).

## Method

This article used a case study method to analyze the 2015 cyber campaigns waged by the Anonymous hacker collective against the jihadist organization, IS. It followed Robert Stake's (2009) contention that case analysis is useful for naturalistic generalization, due to its holistic consideration of variegated factors pertinent within bounded situations. As such, the analysis in this article surveyed a range of multimodal primary and secondary data about Anonymous campaigns. Primary social media data was gathered through word searches via the engines Google, Yahoo!, and Bing, and the platforms Twitter and YouTube, for the key terms 'Operation', 'Op', 'ISIS', 'Paris', 'Charlie Hebdo', and 'Anonymous', in a range of combinations. Secondary data, and news media artefacts that were used as primary sources, were identified through key word Boolean searches on the databases, Factiva, and Informit, as well as Google searches with the 'News' tab criterion selected. In addition to the search words listed above, results were obtained by searching for the phrases 'freedom of expression', 'politics', 'activism', 'hacking', and 'Guy Fawkes'. The information yielded by these searches was then coded using the qualitative research software NVivo for the key cultural criminology themes of Carnavalesque, Crowd-sourcing, Transgression and Subcultural Dissonance. This categorical grouping was then cross-coded for the themes of Media Spirals and the Politics of Meaning. The qualitative analysis combined primary data and secondary commentary about the Anonymous 2015 cyber campaigns against IS. It reflected on the overall utility of a cultural criminology framework for understanding the Anonymous campaigns, and the broader correlation of this phenomenon with underexplored characteristics of the late modern mediascape.

### 1. Trolling, 'Lulz' and the Carnival of Cyber Crime

Perhaps the most apparent entry point for a cultural criminological study of Anonymous, is its association with the performative concept of carnivalesque trolling and its constitutive elements: the 'lulz', Internet-facilitated spectacle, and mask-clad aesthetic. As Coleman (2014: 17), whose anthropological study of the collective is consonant with many of the theoretical presuppositions of cultural criminology, explains: 'Anonymous follows a spirit of humorous deviance ... is built on an anti-celebrity ethic, and intervenes politically in astoundingly rich and varied ways'. Prior to its move into overt political activism in 2008, for example, Anonymous was best known for its 'trolling campaigns', in which members used various means to abuse, harass, or bring into disrepute individuals or institutions with an online presence.<sup>3</sup> Such campaigns, as Anonymous members have indicated (Coleman, 2014), were undertaken in pursuit of 'the lulz'; meaning in this instance, fun or amusement, typically undertaken at the expense of others. With respect to its semantic origins then, it is necessary to note that 'lulz' is an alteration of the acronym 'lol': 'laugh out loud', however, lulz and lols are not synonymous. In distinguishing between the two, Coleman notes that:

Lulz are darker: acquired most often at someone's expense, prone to misfiring and, occasionally, bordering on disturbing and hateful speech ... Lulz are unmistakably

<sup>3</sup> These operations include a 2007 attack on Fox News. See the note below for detail on its political defence against oppression and censorship.

imbued with danger and mystery, and thus speak foremost to *the pleasures of transgression* (2014, p. 31 [our emphasis]).

Indeed, pursuit of ‘the lulz’ represented something of an organizing principle and driving force for Anonymous members in the early life of the collective. From a cultural criminology standpoint, this pursuit resonates with the notion of ‘playful deviance’ described by Presdee (1999) and Redmon (2003). The interpretation of playful deviance used by these authors is also well articulated by Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009, p. 43), as ‘leisure activities performed for – and with – others as a presentation of the “secret” self, with the secrecy maintained by the “moral curtain” of carnivalesque inversion’.<sup>4</sup> From Presdee’s (1999) perspective, this moral curtain assumes added political significance, when trolling and pursuit of the lulz is interpreted as a blow-back against the cultural conditions of late modernity.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1984) work on carnival, Presdee (1999) argues that transgressive carnivalesque crimes can provide individuals with a cathartic ‘second life’ escape from the drudgery, restrictions, routines and demands of their everyday ‘first life’. Through this lens, we might conceive of the lulz – the ‘humorous deviance’ described by Coleman – as a carnivalesque response to the boredom of late modern routinization (see Ferrell, 2004; Steinmetz et al., 2016). Although interpretations of late modernity are many and varied (see Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2013), in Ferrell et al.’s (2008: 56–57, 107) interpretation, the period is characterised by time-space distanciation (see Giddens, 1986), glocalisation, a hyper-pluralism of values, ontological insecurity (Young, 1999), economic inequality, boredom, and the proliferation of mass, new and alternative media. When individuals can cloak their ‘first life’ identities behind pseudonyms, the Internet offers a key site for the ‘second life of the people’ to respond to these conditions: a platform where they ‘can enjoy in private immoral acts and emotions’ (Presdee, 1999, p. 64). Anonymous’ pursuit of the lulz thus highlights the importance of examining the emotional aspect of hacking and computer crime (Steinmetz 2015, p. 126; see Katz, 1988), in combination with the adjunct role that particular online architectures play in facilitating such pseudonymous Internet-based transgression (see Hayward, 2015).

More than any other hacktivist collective, and in accordance with its emotive and performative orientation, Anonymous has, over time, developed a distinct and readily recognizable image and style. In addition to Anonymous members donning Guy Fawkes masks in offline activities and in their video media, they have generated logos and slogans (see fig.1 for an example), which are often cited in videos and press releases. We contend that this distinct aesthetic resonates not only with cultural criminology’s longstanding emphasis on the style of criminal subcultures (see Ferrell, 1993; 1995; 1999), but also with its interest in Situationist notions of spectacle and détournement (Debord, 1983; see Ferrell et al., 2008). Where the Situationist International was a ‘rag-tag assembly of artists, writers and cultural revolutionaries’ which catalysed the 1968 Paris uprising by promoting subversive behaviour and slogans, its ethic lives on in contemporary activist movements

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Coleman (2015, p. 33) likens Anonymous to the trickster archetype found in mythological lore: a provocative and capricious figure driven by a desire to transgress rules and norms.

and subcultures that are predicated on a politics of emancipation and boredom (Ferrell, 2004, p. 288). As Lennard (2012, March 9) notes, Anonymous' incorporation of the Guy Fawkes mask into its aesthetic represents a Situationist form of *détournement*; in this context referring to instances in which subcultures hijack the meaning of official symbols to refashion them into symbols of dissent. Anonymous' adoption of the Guy Fawkes mask is, in fact, something of a *détournement* of a *détournement*: originally worn in Guy Fawkes Night celebrations, the mask was then associated with protest and resistance against secular institutional authority, the principle of which is represented in the film adaptation of the dystopian graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (2006). Clad in the Guy Fawkes mask now associated with the group, Anonymous members have readily made use of spectacle when announcing their operations via YouTube, Twitter and other social media. This media, we argue, plays a simultaneously symbolic *and* instrumental role in Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns. It publicizes operations, intimidates adversaries, and recruits a motivated pool of crowd-sourced labour to Anonymous' cause.

**Figure 1. A variation of Anonymous' logo, featuring one of collective's most well-known slogans: 'We are anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect Us. Knowledge is free'.**



Source: <http://pcwallart.com/anonymous-wallpaper-2.html>

Far from constituting merely a 'decorative criminology' (Ferrell et al., 2004), unpacking the iconography and style of groups such as Anonymous is central to holistically understanding their symbolic function. While it was Anonymous' early trolling campaigns that initially garnered mainstream news media attention, their iconography and strong visual branding has ensured that they remain the most well-known and

recognizable hacker collective (see Walker, 2011, December 8). This is particularly apparent in Anonymous videos, with their striking iconography and incorporation of relatively sophisticated editing techniques. These videos often ‘go viral’, and have been reported on by mainstream media outlets. While some examples can be conceptualised as ‘trolling’, this article will discuss how others provide political rationales for their hacktivism.

Beyond its style then, Anonymous represents a particularly interesting group for cultural criminological analysis owing to its transitory ‘good’ or ‘bad’ status in mainstream news media. The group has intermittently occupied the tandem positions of ‘folk devil’ (Cohen 1972) – described by Fox News as ‘The Internet Hate Machine’ – and ‘folk hero’, valorised for engaging in cyber-vigilante campaigns against sex offenders, animal abusers, corrupt politicians, and terrorist organizations. At other times, Anonymous has been praised by activists and hackers, but condemned by professional political and media institutions for targeting commercial industries, such their Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack on the online financial service PayPal in retaliation for its 2012 suspension of services to Wikileaks. To use Ferrell et al.’s (2008) terminology, Anonymous are a cultural phenomenon constituted by their engagement with mutable media ‘loops’ and ‘spirals’. Its members’ changing political and strategic orientation relates to their engagement with this media, and corresponding media representations of the individuals and institutions they target.

## **2. Contested Meaning of Anonymous’ Anti-IS Operations**

Drawing on social media evidence of Anonymous’ actions against IS, alongside media, academic, and industry responses to these actions, the following two sections of this article will use a cultural criminology framework deriving from Ferrell’s theory to chart the contested political meaning and broad-based efficacy of its anti-IS operations. Though cultural criminology is a broad church in its openness to a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches (see Ferrell 2007), meaning, alongside affect, lie at the heart of the perspective. As Ferrell (2013, p. 269) argues, cultural criminology is chiefly concerned with the ‘politics of meaning’, insofar as they pertain to crime and justice. For the cultural criminologist, meaning is thus ‘the cultural processes by which situations are defined, individuals and groups are categorized and human consequences are understood’ (Ferrell 2013, p. 258), and it is central to explaining institutional criminalization, ‘cultural criminalization’ (Ferrell, 1993), and, to use Katz’s (1988) term, the emotional ‘seductions of crime’ (Hayward & Young, 2004). In the case of Anonymous’ campaigns, meaning is shaped almost entirely within and by environments comprised of expert commentary, mainstream news media, and subcultural spaces online.

To discern the politics of meaning in relation to Anonymous’ behavior, we must conceptualize the late modern mediascape as a ‘representational hall of mirrors’ (Ferrell, 1999), where images and representations of crime are endlessly reflected, refracted and distorted in a litany of news, entertainment and infotainment. This intellectualization on the part of Ferrell derives from Jorge Luis Borges’ (1940) ‘hall of mirrors’ analogy, which, in line with cultural criminology’s cross-disciplinary orientation, has been seminal to studies from a variety of sociological, media, and political philosophy disciplines. It corresponds to the impact of reflexive and networked mediascapes in late modernity

(Richards, 2016), and, increasingly, to algorithmically curated information environments (Wood, 2017). It is in these reflexive, networked, and curated online architectures that Anonymous' anti-IS hacktivism takes place.

Before discussing empirical examples of Anonymous campaigns, it is necessary to explain that in a cultural criminological interpretation of the late modern mediascape, the reality of events is not only regularly obscured by their mediated representations; the *post factum* meaning of the events themselves is often scripted by such representations (Ferrell et al., 2008). This effect is produced by the content of media representations, and also, significantly, by the volume of such representations and the speed at which they circulate. To conceptualize how this mediascape affects the media-crime nexus, Ferrell et al. (2008) offer two parts of an interrelated analogy: the loop and the spiral. With respect to the former part, the authors explain that meaning circulates in a loop-like fashion, whereby mediated representations 'loop back' on events, and 'everyday life recreates itself in its own image' (Ferrell et al., 2008, p. 130). Extending Jean Baudrillard's (1994) theory of 'hyperreality', the figure of the loop denotes the circular nature of late modern media artefacts that in reflexive conditions of time-space distanciation depict the happenings and events of relatively self-contained situations.

From a criminological perspective then, the 'loop' analogy emphasizes the instability and fluidity of cultural constructions of crime, given that the meaning of events is continuously reflected, negotiated and contested by different media actors. Furthermore, this situation assumes greater significance when considered in relation to the latter part of Ferrell's analogy: that such loops of cultural circulation typically represent just one rotation in an ongoing *spiral* of meaning. In these ever-morphing spirals, new events, experiences, and interpretations collide, and in doing so, displace or combine with old mediated representations. Over time, the mutability of this media permanently alters the collective meaning of events, and in turn influences the actions taken by stakeholders in forthcoming situations. Viewed through this lens, Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns constitute a series of loops in an ongoing spiral of meaning. By focusing on public reactions to these campaigns, we can determine the influence that reflexive media has had on Anonymous' ongoing anti-IS operations.

One aspect of Anonymous' anti-IS operations, which demonstrates the organization's reflexive interaction with public opinion, has been their intensifying politicization. While Anonymous has historically associated its actions with both resistance to oppression and the protection of liberal democratic expression,<sup>5</sup> over time the loose-knit collective increasingly exhibited a public identity which, in accordance with cultural criminological precepts, foregrounded the contentious right to democratic expression when it is challenged by non-democratic political violence. In line with this shift in focus, Anonymous' first high-profile challenge to IS occurred following the massacre at the

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<sup>5</sup> There have been a number of prominent anti-US operations waged by Anonymous in protection of open information, politics, and communication. These include Operation Intifada, Operation Anti-Security, Operation Megaupload, a leak and attack on the CIA, the attacks on Interpol and the Bureau of Justice, and the defacement of the US Sentencing Commission website following the indictment and suicide of Reddit co-founder Aaron Schwartz. Furthermore, it is useful to mention that the loosely-knit collective of Anonymous has infamously been involved in cyber offensives against controversial organizations they perceived as exploitative including the Church of Scientology, and governments including those in Saudi Arabia, India, Uganda, and Australia.

satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo. Despite the fact that the 7 January 2015 attack was perpetrated by Said and Cherif Kouachi, who were trained by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, IS was rhetorically associated with the event by mainstream media, and was mentioned in Anonymous' pre-activity statement. In this statement, the group opposed what they perceived as a threat to democratic journalism, when the perpetrators of the attack murdered 17 persons affiliated with Charlie Hebdo for the magazine's publishing of a parodic sketch of the Prophet Muhammad.

Anonymous' statement in relation to Charlie Hebdo was released on an official Anonymous YouTube channel on 9 January by a Belgian branch of the organization. The spokesperson announced: 'we will track down all of your activities online, we will close your accounts on all social networks ... you will not impose your Sharia in our democracies ... we will not let your stupidity kill our liberties and our freedom of expression' (Solon, 2015, January 9: np). Indicating the extant political climate in which this statement was made, it was preceded by an Anonymous message posted on Pastebin two days prior to the shooting, entitled 'Messages to the Enemies of Freedom of Expression', which announced the organization's assumed obligation to act in retaliation to events that would curtail free press and communication (Cluley, 2015, January 12: np).

Actions taken by Anonymous following Charlie Hebdo were coordinated under the Twitter hashtags #OpCharlieHebdo and #OpISIS, and included the downing of a French jihadist website, ansar-alhaqq.net, so that it redirected to the default dark web search engine, Duck Duck Go. They also included actions that might be interpreted as antithetical to the organization's 'freedom of expression' credo, such as Anonymous members' publishing of pro-IS Twitter handles on the information-sharing forum, Pastebin, so that they could be re-tweeted and flagged for removal by Twitter staff. According to *Breitbart News*, in the month that followed, Anonymous claimed responsibility for media platforms taking down '800 Twitter accounts, 12 Facebook pages, and 50 email accounts' (Hayward J, 2015, February 10: np) associated with IS, via this same system of public reporting, listing, and re-tweeting pro-IS accounts and (sometimes) their Internet Protocol (IP) details. During this time, Anon.hq also listed a number of websites for future targeting, and recorded successes via Twitter with the hashtag, #TangoDown.

In combination with its advocacy of censorship, the contested meaning of the campaign during this period was most apparent in media that criticized Anonymous members' expressed political orientation. Following #OpCharlieHebdo, for instance, Anonymous was subject to accusations of bigotry and ethnocentrism regarding their advocacy of (seeming Western) democracies and opposition to Sharia law. To explain the organization's 'official' perspective, an English-language video released February 6 included the statement:

Operation ISIS continues; first we need to clarify a few things, we are Muslims, Christians, Jews; we are hackers, crackers, phishers, agents and spies, or just the guy from next door; we are students, administrators, workers, clerks, unemployed; rich, poor; we are young, old; gay or straight; we wear smart clothes or rugs; we are hedonists, ascetics, joyriders and activists; we come from all races, countries, ethnicity and religion; united as one, divided by zero, we are Anonymous, remember, the



terrorists that are calling themselves Islamic State ISIS are not Muslims (Bond, 2015, February 11: np).

The influence of public sentiment, and the overall politics of this period was also patent in Anonymous' involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, which extended beyond their perceived perspective on IS and Islam. In another example, Anonymous stated a defense against accusations of anti-Semitism in an April 2015 video pertaining to #OpIsrael,<sup>6</sup> which described, 'what it means to claim the name Anonymous' and sought to delegitimize a previous video 'using the Anonymous name attacking Jews' (Anonymous, 2015a, April 22: np).

Collectively, the above examples recall Ferrell's theory that in media spirals, disparate subcultures are often artificially homogenized for the purposes of authorities' classification and control (Ferrell and Sanders 1996). Moreover, this semantic lack of clarification was compounded by Anonymous' decentralized nature, and an overarching confusion regarding the movement's ideological orientation. Also contributing to this was a spiral of media opinion in the months following Charlie Hebdo, which responded to Anonymous' intensified encouragement of social media publics identifying and reporting on suspected pro-IS Twitter material. In addition to video statements, this encouragement included, for example, a rudimentary step-by-step guide Anonymous published on Pastebin that instructed supporters to identify and report IS accounts by running Twitter searches using the hashtag, #IslamicState, despite the fact that such generic criteria would likely yield erroneous results.

The following section of the analysis considers how media loops, and spirals of meaning in Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns were exacerbated by their reflexive embrace of crowd-sourcing. It explores how the end-scale politics of Anonymous' actions were inextricable with their broad-based efficacy and their 'hall of mirrors' reception.

### 3. Official IS Trolling Day: Crowd-sourced Hacktivism in the 'Hall of Mirrors'

'We ask you to show your support and help against ISIS by joining us and trolling them ... do not think you have to be part of Anonymous, anyone can do this and it does not require special skills'

– Anonymous (in Reynolds, 2015, December 7: np).

Following a period of relative inactivity during the middle months of 2015, Anonymous' anti-IS campaign and related media was politically revitalized following the IS attacks on 13 November 2015. In these attacks, explosions and shootings at Bataclan concert theatre, Stade de France football stadium, and a series of Parisian cafes and restaurants left 130 dead. On 16 November, in response to the attack, Anonymous published a widely disseminated YouTube video, announcing the beginning of Operation Paris (#OpParis), in which the narrator pledged not only to take down IS social media

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<sup>6</sup> This was a planned series of cyber attacks against the State of Israel in political retaliation for its occupation of the West Bank. Measures included DDoS assaults, website defacement, and website hijacking.

accounts (as with #OpCharlieHebdo and #OpISIS), but also that IS sympathizers should expect ‘total war’. Dual Francophone and English language videos referred to IS as a ‘virus’, asserting: ‘Anonymous from all over the world will hunt you down ... we will find you and we will not let you go’ (Parkin, 2016, October 6: np).

The protracted nature of Anonymous’ crowd-sourced hacktivism during 2015 was patent in the impact of reflexive subcultural media. In addition to Anonymous’ explicit encouragement of public involvement, for instance, there was a great deal of public engagement with the campaign via Twitter-based references to Anonymous’ cyber offensives, and in commentary by experts and academics. Cyber offensives engaged as part of #OpParis, including several covert Anonymous attacks, were thus promoted by supporters over social media. These included a DDoS effort claimed by Anonymous directed at the website of the security firm, CloudFare, a company provides protection against cyber offensives such as those waged by hacktivists, and was accused of providing services to IS and Al Qaeda. In response to the attack and allegations of supporting terrorist organizations, CloudFare’s CEO Matthew Prince stated: ‘a website is speech. It is not a bomb ... I’d suggest this was armchair analysis by kids – it’s hard to take seriously’ (Hern, 2015, November 19: np). Similarly countering the sentiments of social media supporters, a research scholar at Stanford, Herbert Lin, referred to Anonymous’ activities as ‘useful harassing activities’ that, however, ‘isn’t the silver bullet that takes down ISIS’ (Carey 2015, November 18).

Other attacks associated with Anonymous during this period which were widely received over social media include a hack claimed by the Anonymous affiliate GhostSec, directed at the IS dark-net website, Isdarat. In place of its usual propaganda, GhostSec configured the website to display ads for Viagra and Prozac, with the caption: ‘too much ISIS. Enhance your calm. Too many people are into this ISIS-stuff. Please gaze upon this lovely ad so we can upgrade our infrastructure to give you ISIS content you all so desperately crave’ (Griffin, 2015, November 26: np). In the immediate aftermath of this event, affiliates of Anonymous then implicitly implored followers to pursue their own covert activities, including BinarySec who published a threatening message to IS over Pastebin: ‘the war is on’ (2015, February 11).

The oppositional nature of anti-IS campaign participation was reinforced by a mounting mainstream critique of Anonymous’ Twitter-based reporting of suspected IS material. Critique of #OpISIS and #OpCharlieHebdo had furthermore intensified following collaborations between Anonymous and high-profile hacker individuals, including XRSone. In one example during March 2015, XRSone and Anonymous engineered a fake Twitter account automated by key-word algorithms to compile a list of 26,382 suspected pro-IS accounts, and then published this list on Pastebin (Gladstone, 2015, March 31). This act was criticized extensively by spectators including journalists, academics, and ex-intelligence operatives, given its inclusion of erroneous users. It was noted that high profile targets of the 26,000-strong list included the Arabic language news organization Al Jazeera, and the account of a popular Palestinian rights activists based in Washington (Rogers, 2015, November 25). In relation to such ‘bot’ automated reporting systems, Twitter staff were quoted referring to lists created by Anonymous as ‘wildly inaccurate’ (Rogers, 2015, November 25: np), while news media commentators referred to such measures as a ‘crude online dragnet’ (Parkin, 2016, October 6). The high-profile

think tank researcher Lawrence Husick of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Center for the Study of Terrorism furthermore asserted that such tactics would inevitably target individuals that followed IS 'for research and Intelligence purposes'. In line with popular responses to the campaign, Husick further added that he is 'never in favor of vigilantism ... even when it serves what [he thinks] is a just purpose' (Hussey, 2015, November 17: np).

With respect to the tangible crowd-sourcing performed by Anonymous in the risky and covert hacktivism of #OpParis, members published instructions over social media for supporters to perpetrate relatively simple cyber attacks against IS. In contrast to the rather cursory detail of reporting instructions published under #OpCharlieHebdo, three instruction manuals were provided under #OpParis on one of Anonymous' Internet Relay Chat channels. These were the NoobGuide, ReporterGuide, and SearcherGuide, which independently explained how to identify IS accounts, report them to Twitter, and the basic principles of hacking. They also included instructions and links to facilitate DDoS and Man-in-the-middle (MITM) attacks (Cuthbertson, 2015, November 17), which were complemented by other tangible actions, including the public Anonymous 'Rickrolling' campaign targeted at pro-IS Twitter accounts. This spamming technique involved posting IS-related hashtags and handles alongside links that would direct the user to the 1987 Rick Astley hit song 'Never Gonna Give You Up'. It was the carnivalesque product of an online poll hosted by Anonymous that gauged the most popular anti-IS theme of trolling (Bult, 2015, November 24). In the immediate days following the announcement of #OpParis then, official members and supporters were reported to have leaked details of 5,500 pro-IS Twitter accounts, as well as the addresses, phone numbers, and the full names of five alleged IS recruits in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Tunisia (Hamill, 2015, November 18). In December 2015, an investigation published in *Foreign Policy* revealed that Anonymous and its affiliates had been responsible for taking down 149 IS-related websites, and the exposition of 5900 IS videos and 101,000 pro-IS Twitter profiles (Brookings, 2015, January 7).

Beyond overt vilification of Anonymous' anti-IS campaign tactics, in the 'representational hall of mirrors' (Ferrell, 1999) related to the campaign, certain critics were divided in their opinion. Anonymous expert Gabrielle Coleman, for example, asserted that #OpISIS had been ultimately more effective than #OpParis given that a smaller, dedicated number of people had been working at the operation for significantly longer periods of time, and that the official, original Anonymous team had been 'basically doing quality control' (in Mastroianni, 2015, November 24). Kathy Gilsinan, a cyber journalist at *The Atlantic*, argued that IS's capacity to recruit and fundraise potentially had more to do with the organization's battlefield successes rather than its online propagandizing (Cottee 2015, October 8), while Charlie Winter, who generally supports Anonymous' anti-terrorist efforts, referred to the operations generally as 'disruption rather than meaningful challenge' (Viebeck 2015, December 12). The new tactics and politics adopted by Anonymous against IS were also contentious within the organization, as was documented in an often-cited account of Anonymous infighting by E.T. Brookings (2015, January 7). The following section of this paper discusses how, compounding the carnivalesque and reflexive effects of anti-IS campaign media, such disputes were exacerbated by a fragmenting of membership, and conflicting subcultural beliefs in hacktivist administrations.

#### 4. Anonymous Divided

Regarding this last issue for consideration, it is necessary to redirect attention to the overarching politics of Anonymous' hacktivism, for it is this aspect of its anti-IS campaigns that produced noteworthy discord within the collective. Insofar as the actions of Anonymous members against IS can be understood through a cultural criminology framework, it is pertinent that major subcultural differences between members correlate with their subjective positioning in relation to governments and media corporations. This issue is represented by Presdee's (1999: 29) assertion that the carnival of crime 'becomes a challenge to both the law and the lawmakers'. Furthermore, from this epistemological standpoint, media loops and spirals comprise the apparatus of social control against which deviant subjects perform transgression (Ferrell et al. 2008). Through an aggregate theoretical lens, this article therefore conceives of subcultures as activist and critical in relation to the dominant power structures of mainstream media and oppressive governments. We recognize, however, that the dissonance created by this orientation must be acknowledged *inter-alia*; as Ferrell (2013: 261) states, 'illicit subcultures' such as Anonymous are 'shaped not by unity and proximity but by forced dislocation, spatial drift, and episodic engagement'.

Demonstrating subcultural dissonance, the meaning and efficacy of Anonymous' anti-IS campaigns correspond implicitly to an organizational division that occurred when members of GhostSec, a subset of Anonymous, decided to collaborate with the US government. Here two members of the group, DigitaShadow and Mikro, were remunerated by US Intelligence agents in exchange for their cyber expertise in counterterrorism efforts, following which time they differentiated themselves from Anonymous, and formed a legitimate commercial entity under the name Ghost Security Group (GSG). GSG currently has two branches: Ghost Security, which is coordinated by DigitaShadow, whose 14 members are responsible for hacking, translating, scrubbing, and downing websites; and CtrlSec, run by Mikro, who works with 28 volunteers on social media to identify, list and report suspect accounts.<sup>7</sup>

Since the division within Anonymous, experts have highlighted how a lack of public understanding regarding hacktivist membership has impeded informed debate on the issues at stake. While, in line with Ferrell's understanding of disparate online subcultures, it may be patent that core Anonymous members have politicized their operations and interests, certain official Anonymous members have also emphatically criticized what they perceive as an ideological corruption that comes from GSG's collusion with exploitative governments. A member of GhostSec who refused to join the new GSG, TorReaper, for instance, insists that as a result of the group obtaining monetary contracts, GSG now responds to directives from State departments, compromising their activist integrity. Moreover, although some Anonymous members such as Ransacker concede that 'it is necessary to have some relationship with government' (Smith, 2015), official Anonymous Twitter accounts have entirely denounced interaction with government officials.

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<sup>7</sup> GSG as a collective attempted to legitimize its profile, adopting a corporate-esque insignia and referring to itself as 'a counterterrorism network that combats extremism on the digital front lines of today using the Internet and social media as a weapon' (Gilbert, 2015, December 15). GhostSec is a subset of Anonymous that still remains operational and is often confused with the two branches of GSG.



@YourAnonNews, for instance, on their official website and linked to via Twitter accounts, wrote:

Any attempts to act in secrecy, supporting political or governmental organizations, will be discouraged by us or completely ignored to safeguard our allies and supporters fighting for openness and transparency within governments, dictatorships and organizations around the globe that control various aspects of our lives (Anonymous, 2015b, December 15).

The partnership between GSG and US Intelligence was facilitated by Michael Smith, an advisor to the US Congress and founder of the private security contractor, Kronos Advisory. Although US Security and Intelligence agencies for the most part do not disclose information provided by groups such as GSG that is used in counterterrorism operations, limited statements made by US Defense personnel have confirmed their utility. In response to questions about GSG, for instance, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, General David Petraeus, stated: ‘Smith has shared with me some of the open source data he has provided to various US agency officials, and I can see how that data would be of considerable value to those engaged in counterterrorism initiatives’ (Brookings, 2015, January 7). Indeed, the GSG mission statement implies that the organization views itself, in line with David Myles et al.’s (2016) study of citizen crime-solvers, as something other than vigilantes: the organization seeks to portray itself as a depersonalized and professional entity, distinct from Anonymous’ emotional crusade.

One example of GSG’s ‘professionalized’ crime-solving was its claimed thwarting of a second IS attack in Tunisia following the June 2015 shooting in Sousse. According to statements made by members, they did so by monitoring IS social media chatter, using GoogleMaps and IP addresses to identify vulnerable locations, and by coordinating surveillance via a GSG chat room called the ‘IS Hunting Club’. Information pertaining to a suspected attack by IS-followers was then allegedly reported to the FBI with Smith acting as an intermediary, following which time several people were arrested (Brookings, 2015).

In response to a GSG video that announced its successes and coverage, and was hosted in more than 20 news media outlets, the official @YourAnonNews account denounced GSG’s behavior, calling the group ‘deeply stupid’ (Anonymous, 2015b). In this posting, the Anonymous member expressed concern that collaborating with government entities could ‘legitimize the spread of Internet censorship ... and lead to the increase of censorship for everyone, including Anonymous’. As the *International Business Times* reports, key former Anonymous member Jeremy Hammond also expressed political concerns implicitly related to the founding principles of Anonymous, which corresponded to the moralization of Steven Levy’s emancipatory, oppositional, and activist ‘hacker ethic’ (1984). Hammond warned that the ‘naïve fools behind the operation are being manipulated by intelligence agents taking advantage of the emotional reaction to the Paris attacks to harness our skills to fight their hypocritical “war on terrorism”’ (Hammond, 2015, December 15).

From a combined political and logistical perspective then, individual, high profile current Anonymous members expressed concern that government partnerships would produce a greater likelihood of infiltration and sabotage of operations through the

increased risk posed by informants and government spies. Amongst these was Discordian, who decried the majority of the organization's public efforts against IS and referred to the division within Anonymous as a civil war. In an interview with *Vice: Motherboard*, he stated: 'I think it is extremely dangerous to be working with the FBI ... old Anonymous people are doing this for freedom of information, freedom of expression ... operation ISIS people are running ineffective operations ... to gain media attention' (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2016, November 5). In this statement Discordian also asserted that 'censorship campaigns don't solve anything ... they shouldn't be censored, they should be opposed' (Cottee, 2015). In response to these and other statements, a co-founder of GSG named Mikro, asserted in interview: 'that's bullshit ... why should somebody who doesn't let other people practice free speech have free speech? We're saving lives' (Cottee, 2015). Mikro warned against the dangerous and chaotic nature of Anonymous' operations, claiming that the collective 'has a habit of shooting in every direction and asking questions later' (Price, 2015, November 19). Far from unitary, the subcultural participants in anti-IS campaigns were intrinsically divided by political and strategic perspectives, and by their stated official subscription to the values of one or another hacktivist administration.

## Conclusion

This analysis has provided a preliminary overview of Anonymous' efforts against IS that have been widely reported on in international media, scholarship, and expert commentary. Through a cultural criminological framework, it has emphasized issues pertaining to their ideological and operational saliency, given the political nature of Anonymous' behavior, and its affiliations with social media publics and other hacktivist entities. Through reference to the late modern mediascape, constituted by the carnivalesque and media spirals, the investigation has interpreted conditions that created for contradictions and contention in Anonymous' anti-IS activities. Despite certain Anonymous members' promotion of integrity, for instance, the crowd-sourced and prescriptive bent of the collective's statements following IS attacks in France demonstrate that it does to an extent gauge its operational successes by its widespread populist reception. Indicating political contradiction, such statements also advocate freedom of expression, while petitioning supporters to participate in censorship activities. On an organizational level, the February 2015 YouTube announcement where Anonymous proudly cites both 'hedonists' and 'ascetics' as members might furthermore be interpreted as contradictory to Anonymous members' critique of GSG for receiving payments, and to its overarching ban on funding solicitation.

In the light of Anonymous' disaggregated structure, this article has not sought to quantify the myriad actions taken by those who claim the Anonymous name against those that support the organization that calls itself 'Islamic State'. Rather, it has reflected on strategic and political tensions that have emerged in line with Anonymous' challenge to IS, drawing from its actions in 2015 as a case study. From a preliminary cultural criminological standpoint, the analysis finds that with the critical impact of public opinion in an age of social media, Anonymous will likely face a series of semantic and strategic impediments. Its productive efforts against IS have the potential to be undermined by the organization's embrace of infighting and reflexive competition, compounded by its sometimes-ineffective and contentious crowd-sourcing and politicization.

To conclude, we wish to reflect briefly on some of the methodological questions raised by our study – questions that have relevance to future cultural criminological studies of the Internet. Ours is a partial account of Anonymous’ anti-IS operations that has focused on the role of the collective’s public identity and self-presentation. The partial nature of our account is a product of our methodology. Like other studies in cultural and media criminology that are concerned with online phenomena, our study drew exclusively on documents that were open-access and online, and took an unobtrusive approach to observing Anonymous’ public activities. A major limitation to this approach is that, despite its interpretivist orientation, it provides scant opportunity for what Ferrell (1997, p. 10), building on Weberian insights (1949), terms criminological *verstehen*: ‘a sympathetic understanding between researcher and subjects of study, whereby the researcher comes in part to share in the situated means and experiences of those under scrutiny’. As Coleman’s (2014) digital ethnography of Anonymous demonstrates, while criminological *verstehen* does not require the physical co-presence of researcher and research subject, it may be obtained through participatory online methodologies. Subsequent investigations of hacktivist entities might extend the framework outlined in this paper to engage in such a participatory project.

## Declaration

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