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## "We are Anonymous." Anonymity in the Public Sphere – Challenges of Free and Open Communication

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**Abstract:** Anonymity, the stealth mode of public communication, challenges different actors who deal with freedom of communication issues in their day to day life – be it professional journalists, information and communication scientists, technicians or political activists. This article aims to deliver theoretical background on the concept of anonymity on the macro-level, as well as to shed light on how different communicators deal with anonymity on the micro-level. Based on the example of the *Anonymous* movement, communicative actions are put in relation to media technological artifacts and their surrounding media environment with a focus on journalistic practice and public response to the phenomenon. The analysis concludes with the need for a preservation of options for anonymous public communication as a dimension of freedom of communication after carefully considering both the advantages and the potential risks connected to that mode of private-public communication.

**Keywords:** anonymity, *Anonymous*, authorship, authenticity, accountability, credibility, freedom of communication, freedom of speech, journalism ethics, online communication, privacy

### **Introduction: *Anonymous* and the Concept of Anonymity in the Public Sphere**

In the once-upon-a-time days of the First Age of Magic, the prudent sorcerer regarded his own true name as his most valued possession but also the greatest threat to his continued good health, for – the stories go – once an enemy, even a weak unskilled enemy, learned the sorcerer's true name, then routine and widely known spells could destroy or enslave even the most powerful.

(Vernor Vinge: True Names, 1981)

The mathematician and computer scientist Vernor Vinge wrote the novella "True Names" in what were still the early days of many-to-many computer mediated communication, and with this created a narration which pioneered many following concepts of "cyber-spatial" communicative connectivity. Vinge, much like other

American authors, as for example William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Neal Stephenson or Marge Piercy, vividly imagined a worldwide communications network as a consensual reality – and with this developed common tropes and metaphors that still shape our ideas (Lakoff/Johnson 2011) and understanding of the Internet today. The very first sentence of his novella, quoted above (Vinge 1981: 239), suggests that Vinge anticipated how important the issues of anonymity and pseudonymity are in the context of public (online) communications. It also suggests that the stereotypical notion of the rational developer of technological artifacts, who is ignorant towards cultural or societal reciprocity connected to his or her piece of communications technological innovation, has been outdated ever since. This is likewise shown in the research of Gabriella Coleman (2011), who – as a social anthropologist – analyzed the political framework and related social interactions within the field of software development. Exemplified by the Debian Linux developer community, she identified forms of communicative action that can be strongly linked to classical political ideas of liberalism and social deliberation. It appears to be impossible to set practices of communications technological engineering apart from related practices of social engineering.

This research result is transferable to the concept of anonymity – which is a special mode of communication on the technological as well as on the social level of the public sphere. It exemplifies the tensions between different levels of censorship and speech restriction and different dimensions of freedom of communication. In the context of current Internet regulation policy processes, it appears to be important to shed more light on the issue of anonymity in public discourse from a communication science perspective, as major claims to deny Internet users their right to anonymity in public are gaining more popularity, for example in Germany. There is little academic literature on the relation of anonymity and the public sphere; however, there are several general legal texts (e.g. Bäumlér/ von Mutius 2003), as well as activist literature on how to stay anonymous online (e.g. Henderson 2013), and some analyses on journalism's trouble with anonymous sources (e.g. Carlson 2012). Recently, the author and campaigner Cole Stryker (2012) presented a more general approach and a broader history of anonymity as a social construct based on interviews with code breakers, whistle-blowers, researchers, hacktivists, and mothers. He positions himself as a defender of anonymity in the following way:

"The Web will continue to see warfare in the coming decade. Its primary battleground will be the identity space. Your ability to define who you are as a human, to be as open or as private with your personal information as you want to be, to speak out against injustices anonymously, or to role-play as someone you wish you were – these are the freedoms we will fight to keep. Will you decide who you are or will you be defined by the identity brokers?" (Stryker 2012: 16)

The last question clearly deserves several answers. In the following, the paper outlines major argumentations concerning anonymity as a private mode of public communication before taking a closer look on how journalism deals with

anonymity as well as giving insights into the current negotiation process around anonymity in the online public sphere of the Internet. After more general lines of argumentation are pointed out, this paper aims to combine the macro perspective with an exemplary case study on the micro level of communicative action – discussing the *Anonymous* movement and traditional media's response to their form of online activism. How is anonymity publicly negotiated in the context of online discourse? Which advantages and disadvantages are recognizable? Do we need to get rid of or preserve the opportunity to publicly utter something without exposure? This analysis starts with focusing on a processual contextualization, aiming to provide schematics for the understanding of anonymous practices on the micro level of communicative action in both (h)activism and journalism. The paper draws on research concerning anonymity in the public sphere from the field of communication studies as well as from the literary and historical sciences. The latter deal with anonymity in their discussions of the impact of authorship on the meaning that is created by a text or the impact of anonymous utterances in the formation of political decisions. Advantages and disadvantages of anonymous communication are being discussed and the general question of the preservation of the possibility of anonymous communication and its impact on societal negotiation processes in democratic cultures is being addressed.

### **Anonymity as a Basic Principle of Open Public Communication**

Anonymity is socially useful and has been a vital tool for the preservation of political speech and discourse throughout history.

(Yaman Akdeniz: Anonymity, Democracy and Cyberspace, 2002)

### ***Relations between Anonymity and the Public Sphere***

Current debates about anonymity and pseudonymity reproduce arguments for and against a communicative practice that circumvents the boundaries of the public sphere in order to publicly utter the in a given time, space and political power structure unutterable. Anonymous publications of opinions and ideas, or – in other words – public communication which would not reveal the "true name" of the author/speaker/producer was common in different periods of time and in different public or social spheres of various countries – i.e. the building of the proverbial "marketplace of ideas" in the 18th century period that led up to the ratification of the American constitution, in which anonymous or pseudonymous newspaper articles freely debated constitutional issues without fear of persecution or loss of reputation for unpopular ideas. Smith Ekstrand and Imfeld Jeyaram conclude their analysis of this process with the following point:

"Freeing authors from direct attack to their reputations and their safety, anonymity provided a cloak of security and confidence to debate the merits of the proposed Constitution. It allowed a vigorous and heated debate to occur on paper [...], anonymity was arguably effective: It encouraged readers to focus their attentions on the words, not the personalities, and rationally debate issues surrounding the Constitution rather than be persuaded by external influences" (Smith Ekstrand/Imfeld Jeyaram 2011: 52).

There are other examples where anonymity played a key role in periods of societal change and development, be it anonymous criticism of absolutism during the French Revolution in Early Modern Europe or anonymous leaflets used by the resistance during the national socialist regime in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, to name only two common historical examples.

### ***Anonymity as a Private Mode of Public Communication***

Anonymity is the condition in which a message source is absent or largely unknown to and/or intentionally hidden from a message recipient. There is no name or acknowledged identity related to a given text or utterance, or, as Bronco puts it, "the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source is unknown and unspecified" (Bronco 2004:129). As a result of this absence of source information, anonymity is also considered as a type of privacy (Anonymous 1998: 382, Ess 2010: 31ff). It is an opportunity to regain privacy inside the realm of public communication while actively taking part in the negotiation processes of the public sphere. This makes it appealing, especially to people who need to discuss sensitive issues in public.

Marx (1999) relates anonymity to a model of identity knowledge. He defines seven types of identity knowledge: legal name, locatability, pseudonyms linked to name or location, pseudonyms that are not linked to name or location (for either policy reasons or for the fact that the audience does not realize it is a pseudonym), pattern knowledge, social categorization and symbols of eligibility/noneligibility. With this as the basis, he defines anonymity as "one polar value of a broad dimension of identifiability versus nonidentifiability", while "to be fully anonymous means that a person cannot be identified according to any of the seven dimensions of identity knowledge" (Marx 1999: 100).

Thus, anonymity has to be distinguished from some closely related yet different conditions of communication as for example confidentiality or pseudonymity. While the source is entirely unidentified in anonymous communications, "confidentiality is a condition in which the source can be connected to his or her comments by some (e.g. researchers, reporters) who agree not to reveal the source to others" (Anonymous 1998: 383). Only very few people are able to relate the utterance to its source: it remains anonymous to the majority of recipients but not to all of them.

Pseudonymity takes on a slightly different perspective as Anonymous puts it "a sense of anonymity may be achieved not only by the absence of a source's identity, but through a fictitious alternative identity called a pseudonym" (Anonymous 1998: 384). With this, it is not quite the same as a complete absence of source information; moreover, there are two basic differences between anonymity and pseudonymity. Firstly, as recipient, you can create some kind of identity of the source if you recognize more than one utterance, e.g. if someone frequently comments on certain issues in an online forum and if he or she always uses the same pseudonym you might get an idea of that person's mindset and even

speculate about his or her position in society. This approach is nearly impossible with entirely anonymous utterances, unless someone closely analyzes a person's writing style and word choice and identifies patterns that lead to recognition. The second major difference is the fact that when that person does not use some kind of cryptic or fictitious pseudonym but a common name, "receivers may have no reason to suspect that the apparent message source is not the actual message source" (Anonymous 1998: 384). All three conditions do not focus on the message itself, but on the message source, yet they differ when it comes to the degree and accessibility of source information. Anonymous therefore suggests a model in which anonymity is viewed as a continuum from fully anonymous to fully identified. "A source is not simply anonymous or identified, but may also be partially so" (Anonymous 1998: 387). This is of special importance when it comes to the issue of credibility of an utterance because it does make a difference for the recipient whether he or she assumes a "real person" behind the utterance or someone playing with different identities or simply inventing a new persona within the respective speech situation.

The trend of focusing more on the person behind the utterance as opposed to the actual content and meaning or argumentation itself, has led to much controversy within the field of textual sciences and beyond. The question whether each text stands for itself or whether it always has to be read in the context of its production remains debatable. There are uncodified social conventions about the question of who is allowed to speak out what in which public sphere; socio-demographic markers may not entirely determine, but clearly influence the meaning of a public utterance, especially when it comes to criticism or unpopular ideas. Thus, a traceable and identifiable authorship is related to authority, mirrored in the normative value of authenticity, imposing a limitation on the meaning of a given text or utterance. Pabst puts it as follows:

"The author does not define the meaning, but creates the assumptions you can use to (re-) construct historical meanings. Access to the text is still regulated by the idea of the author as an interface of different knowledge preconceptions. The name of the author is one of the most important signifiers that provide us with the opportunity to relate certain knowledge to a text" (Pabst 2011: 1, own translation).

This process of authoring was countered by a stream of literary critics and scholars following the ideas of Roland Barthes, who celebrated the proverbial "death of the author" (Barthes 1977) in the mindset of post-structuralism and deconstruction, questioning the notion of a singular identity of a subject. Despite these claims, the singular author has always been a practical necessity in the process of public text production. This holds true in relation to the question of ownership and rights management that we currently juggle with in the context of new media technological opportunities for copying and sharing distribution. Here, we see a clash between proponents of a cultural commons and those who favor the idea of personal or commercial ownership of ideas. This debate mirrors the shifting dualism of individuality/subjectivity and the totality of the mass/swarm

throughout European cultural history. There is a good deal of play with both notions of individual and social identity in the public sphere and as the following example about the *Anonymous* movement shows, this game is transgressing national borders as well – with the help of cultural memes and networked communications technologies.

Anonymity was regarded as a process of de-individuation during the 1970s (Diener 1976, Zimbardo 1970, in: Anonymous 1998: 389), a theory that was quickly accepted and initially used as an explanation for such phenomena as flaming in online forums and similar forms of anti-normative behavior. De-individuation theory suggests that "immersion in a group should produce a loss of identity and less socially regulated behavior" (ibid.), a theory that has been questioned by more recent scholarship on the issue of power and influence in computer-mediated environments (Spears/Lea 1994). Apparently the Jungian process of individuation is not reversed if we temporarily chose to stay anonymous and reclaim privacy in public. On the contrary, people who communicate anonymously and without fear of retribution are able to act in accordance with their identity which is not subjected to peer pressure or social desirability in this case.

In his theoretical model of anonymity, Bronco suggests a distinction of six different types: physical anonymity, discursive anonymity, self-anonymity, other-anonymity, offline anonymity and online anonymity. "Physical anonymity" describes, for example, visual anonymity; it is generally defined as the inability to sense the physical presence of a message source. "Discursive anonymity" is the condition in which specific comments cannot be attributed to a specific individual source. It is based on the degree of source specification, the extent to which a message source is distinguished from other possible sources. "Self-anonymity" is a sender's perceived anonymity to others when he or she is the message source. "Other-anonymity" is the anonymity experienced by a user who receives communication from an unidentified source. "Offline anonymity" describes the realm of face-to-face communication, telephone and "traditional media", whereas "Online anonymity" describes anonymity using computer-based networks. The last distinction seems questionable today, yet the pseudonymous scholar authoring this analysis justifies it by claiming "achieving anonymity in the former requires the sender more effort, it is more the natural state of affairs in the latter" (Bronco 2004: 129). The thesis of a "natural state of affairs" of communicating anonymously in online environments could well be deduced from the fact that it is easier to wear a "mask" in this surrounding, but recent research on the usage of "true names" suggest the exact opposite. As a BITKOM (Federal Association for Information Technology, Telecommunications and New Media) market research study (BITKOM 2012) on social media usage in Germany showed, most people actually prefer to use their real name. Only one percent prefer anonymity; two percent use a fake name; eight percent use either first or surname; ten percent use a short version of the real name; 20 percent use some kind of pseudonym or nickname and 58 percent use their full name on social networking sites. A possible explanation for this behavior is that social conventions related to the usage of one's



"true name" with all the skepticism about anonymous communicative action and the benefits of credibility and reputation building that come with the usage of real names outweigh the "natural" structural possibility of staying anonymous in an online environment.

Next to his theoretical model as depicted above, Bronco also identifies several pros and cons concerning anonymous publications. Frequently used arguments focusing on the dangers are:

- 1) a potential lack of accountability for one's actions. In the context of online communication this argument is usually followed by a set of dystopian rhetoric (with only few publicly available empirical evidences) about the use of anonymity for high tech pedophilia, virtual pornography, destructive computer viruses, terrorist activities, threats to national security and other forms of cybercrimes, cybersmearing and flaming;
- 2) credibility is re-evaluated alongside the degree of source specification, there is a decrease in trust, a difficulty to establish a reputation, more room for deception and frivolousness;
- 3) the claim that it limits effective decision making in organizations because the individual gets no credit for his or her ideas/input and there is less identification with the organization or team;
- 4) a more general fear of a lack of orientation stating that the vast quantities of information online today demand that citizens know who is speaking (Bronco 2004: 130).

Major arguments focusing on the advantages of anonymous public communication are:

- 1) it encourages free expression, the ability to voice different opinions or unpopular ideas and thus can be regarded as a cornerstone of democracy;
- 2) it facilitates a flow of communication on public issues without killing the messenger; tiplines, whistleblowing; anonymous political communication provides a "critical means for the expression of dissent" (Bronco 2004, 133);
- 3) there is a possibility of obtaining sensitive information, e.g. in research or sensitive personal issues;
- 4) the focus is on the content of the message itself which can be regarded as more important than the source;
- 5) anonymity encourages a culture of sharing of ideas, there is more honesty in feedback, e.g. in evaluation processes at work or in class;
- 6) it protects the source from subsequent contact, e.g. anonymous donors;
- 7) it avoids persecution and retaliation for one's beliefs or opinions;
- 8) it encourages risk-taking, innovation and experimentation
- 9) it enhances elements of play and recreational interaction;
- 10) it increases fairness, e.g. anonymous applications on the job market (Bronco 2004: 131ff).

In addition to these arguments, anonymity also allows for the possibility of bringing people together who would not interact with each other if they knew the other person's identity; this can be regarded as a healthy tool for societal inclusion and the exchange of ideas and positions. After taking all of this into consideration, it is possible to say that anonymity can be used for potential benefit or potential deceit of communication partners. It does encourage public communication rather than silence or voicelessness.

### ***Anonymity and Journalism***

Journalism usually avoids using anonymous sources, yet identifiers are frequently removed from articles or broadcast publications in order to guarantee the safety of sources that prefer to remain in the background. Davies describes that "the media's use of anonymous sources has come under increasing scrutiny. Anonymity gives sources the ability to distance themselves from a story if necessary" (Davies 2008: 32). Confidentiality, as depicted above, is key to this practice. Verification of anonymous sources is less easy than working with clearly identifiable sources, yet pseudonyms or anonymity is oftentimes used in reporting, especially when it comes to people who need not be exposed by the respective article. This holds true i.e. if under-aged people are involved or if people accused of crimes are not convicted; it is equally if not more important in cases of whistleblower protection. As Levmore points out, "newspapers [...] withhold the names of letter writers, especially where there is a plausible case for whistleblower protection and, of course [!], reporters carefully protect the identities of some sources." (Levmore 2010: 55) He also claims that only the reporter's and editor's reputation allows for the anonymity of a source (ibid.), which builds up to his argumentation against anonymous online communications.

Much to Levmore's concern, people without a carefully generated reputation have the possibility to publish anything they want to on the Internet. Even worse: "even the intermediaries may be anonymous on Internet gossip sites" (ibid.). This major difference between the traditional media system and online media, according to Levmore, is the key reason for more regulation when it comes to digital communication. Traditional media has higher publication barriers and a more or less limited audience and memory capacity. This line of argumentation goes against the tradition of liberal democratic media theories which aim towards the inclusion of as many citizens' voices as possible into the public negotiation processes (Christians et al. 2009). By highlighting the potential dangers of anonymous online communication and calling for a public sphere which is even more regulated and restrictive than the traditional media sphere, he completely ignores the benefits. By claiming to provide more security for the allegedly silent victims of public utterances, the provision of security for those who dare not to be silent in public is at stake, e.g. whistleblowers or political activists who would face severe punishment if their identities were disclosed. The risk of silencing those who bring in vital and at times controversial or even undesirable argumentation



into the public discourse is higher than the risk of exposing someone to defamatory trolling under the anonymizing veil of untraceable digital communication. Even the inclusion of unwanted arguments or utterances into the public sphere can provide positive outcomes – be it only the possibility to publicly oppose them. By denying access to the public sphere, by ignoring unwanted positions, one does not necessarily get rid of them. On the contrary, this could rather lead to fragmentation and radicalization within society and the public sphere. By giving people a chance to utter their thoughts without the barriers of social desirability, others receive the chance to recognize and oppose unwanted claims or ideologies.

### ***Anonymity and Digital Communication Technologies – Relations between Artifact and Concept***

The concept of anonymity does exist without the realm of media technology; negotiations about anonymity as a mode of communication are, however, frequently discussed alongside new technological opportunities (cf. Levmore 2010). New media technological artifacts are influenced both by the idea of anonymity in their development as well as influencing communicative practices of staying anonymous; thus they remain in a private mode of communication while uttering something publicly. This corresponds to the perspective promoted by the sociologist Langdon Winner, who described how technological "artifacts have politics" (Winner 1989).

In the context of digital communication, the question concerning anonymity in online public spheres is discussed differently from offline anonymity. As Rob Kling describes it: "The Internet provides new opportunities for anonymous communication – opportunities to make political claims and non-political comments, engage in whistleblowing, perform commercial transactions, and conduct personal correspondence without disclosing one's identity." (Kling 1999:79). So while the very notion of anonymous communication is popular throughout the history of public communication, it has jumped to a new level within the context of new information and communication technologies. With every new communication technology new communicative techniques and practices are developed, as well as new restrictions upon forms of communication. Initially, it seems as though those who discuss anonymity online are mostly criticizing personalized advertising (Goltzsch 2003). From a more transnational perspective, there are more pressing issues than whether you receive product recommendations that suit the taste you openly presented on social networking sites or that go along with the key words you just used while operating a search engine (Godwin 2003).

Anonymous online communication differs from other forms of anonymity: it reaches more people with less costs and has a greater potential power. Bronco also assesses it as "morally neutral", as it is used for purposes that facilitate both beneficial and detrimental outcomes (Bronco 2004: 130). While Nagenborg reads

the urge to stay anonymous as opposition to a trend of obsessive identity politics (Nagenborg 2012), Saco links it to the increase in surveillance technologies ten years earlier. "Precisely because we live in a context wherein surveillance has become ubiquitous [...] anonymity can become a viable and even advisable form of resistance" (Saco 2002: 127). Technical and social mechanisms are closely tied together. Without the possibility of observation from a third party that is not supposed to get the information or see what is going on, there is no need for encryption. This also holds true for the concept of anonymity. Only without public exposure is there no need for public anonymity. As communicating online in a public sphere always involves public exposure, the option of doing so anonymously appears to be a necessary precaution (if one follows democratic ideas of public negotiations in an inclusive public sphere with access granted to every citizen). The degree of anonymity online, however, also depends on the technological skills of those who want to mask or unmask the communicator. Here, technological and social engineering are closely intertwined.

## ***Anonymous' Political Communication***

### ***Anonymous as a Formation of Communicative Action***

In an exemplary analysis on the micro level, the focus now shifts from anonymity as a concept to communicative actions of an at best temporarily connected early 21<sup>st</sup> century "virtual community" (Rheingold 1993). *Anonymous* is a loose network that follows democratic ideas of individual freedom, especially freedom of speech and communication and hopes to bring awareness to the public concerning cases where one or both of these liberties are in danger (Coleman/Ralph 2011). With their online and offline campaigning and communicative protests, fighting against the *Scientology* sect or supporting the whistleblower platform *WikiLeaks* or the *Occupy* movement, *Anonymous* successfully received the attention of policy makers and media outlets, both on- and offline. Using the security of anonymous symbolic action and their own knowledge of digital technologies, this transnational postmodern "neo-tribe" - as these kinds of dispersed digital or virtual communities are also characterized (Maffesoli 1996) - takes over the function of the protagonist in the deliberation narrative. This narrative is unified by the cultural symbol, icon or meme (Blackmore 1999) of Guy Fawkes, who used his mask to hide his identity in order to avoid personal persecution.

On this level of the symbolic, they play with intertextuality – which is a common mode of communication in hypertext as well as most other forms of textual communication – e.g. in the context of religious texts and symbolism. In their anonymity, they identify themselves with a certain idea or mindset which reappears throughout various popular media texts since the initial case of Guy Fawkes' failed attack on the British Parliament in 1605 (the so called "Gunpowder Plot"), regularly remembered on a public holiday in the UK (the celebration of

"Bonfire Night"). The mask in its current form is more related to the comic "V for Vendetta" by Alan Moore and David Lloyd (published in the British comic anthology "Warrior" between 1982 and 1985), and the respective 2005 DC reprint and movie adaptation (Moore/Lloyd 2005). It was in fact produced as a movie merchandise product. Both the comic book and the movie are an allegory of governmental oppression. Characterized by the modern fear of totalitarianism and fascism, they draw on many issues: governmental surveillance, propaganda and media manipulation, corruption, religious hypocrisy and torture. The main plot places an individual subject to a perverted oppressive system and the story focuses on liberalism's major narrative of deliberation. In "V", an individual person with their own personal history and singular experience stands behind each mask. Personal development and individual deliberation are opposed by a violent governmental hierarchy. This government uses monotheistic religion to legitimize its power alongside sinister acts of Orwellian disinformation campaigning unquestioned by the majority of the people of the fictitious setting of a dystopian Great Britain. What follows is a story of Enlightenment: the truth is made public and the citizenry begins to open its eyes to the importance of the process of critical doubt instead of simply accepting the comfortable limitations of ignorance and blind belief. "V" provides a simple solution in the end: everyone takes off his or her mask in the final scene, watching silently how the empty building of the oppressive dystopian British parliament burns down. Unmasking is only possible after the risks are literally minimalized. Readers perceive a vivid remake of the clash between humanism and anti-humanism.

Staying anonymous and speaking in the name of an idea in the underlying liberal cause rather than utilizing their real names, *Anonymous* expands its scope of action. The opportunity to remain anonymous influences the process to a large extent. Coleman and Ralph (2011) describe the history and development of *Anonymous* from an anthropological perspective. Different streams emerged after the movement's initial formation on the message board *4chan*, adhering to different practices of communicative action. The most prominent are *Anonnet*, which gained popularity from trolling the "church" of Scientology in 2008, and *AnonOps*, which formed in protest against digital privateering after the *Motion Picture Association of America* (MPAA) had hired an Indian firm to run a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack against the file sharing service *The Pirate Bay* in 2010. *AnonOps* launched an elaborate "counterstrike" and later that year caught mainstream media attention for their support of the anonymous whistleblowing platform *WikiLeaks*. "Despite differences between these two networks – and there is some crossover in participants – they command some degree of mutual respect because people in either domain are committed to a shared ideal: that *Anonymous* is a name people can use to organize in distinct and divergent styles" (Coleman/Ralph 2011).

This depiction provides a general classification: *Anonymous*, above all, is a name in this context. It functions as a label for a shared idea(l) of a free flow of information and is detached from the individual member of the movement. This

definition is vague when it comes to the analysis of social movements. Coleman is aware of this issue, explaining that “*Anonymous* resists straightforward definition as it is a name currently called into being to coordinate a range of disconnected actions, from trolling to political protests” (Coleman 2011). She concludes that *Anonymous* does have a coherent agenda:

“Participants across both networks are oriented towards issues of censorship, information freedom, and as their name so obviously signals, they tend to be overwhelmingly committed to the long-standing liberal principle that anonymous speech is necessary for a healthy democratic society” (Coleman 2011).

This correlates with the self-depiction of *Anonymous* claiming to have no leaders and no structure, but being a "brand" or a "collective" (Olson 2012: 7). Does de-individuation take place after all? No, it does not. As one member puts it, "[...] we are all individuals, not numbers in a government computer. We are *Anonymous* and we are the future of an equal and accepted human race [...]" (Anonymous 2012). This individuality remains unrecognizable for the audience though. It reconstructs one major element of the *Anonymous* narration. By choosing a system of symbolic representation and identification based on the storyline of "V" (above), *Anonymous* consciously takes sides with a form of humanism that combines both liberal and egalitarian ideals. As Hayase (2011) puts it, "anonymity can erase differences such as class, race and nationality that automatically place people's relationship in the often hidden hierarchy of power dynamics. [...] the mask creates a space that frees one from conformity [...], one can break free from power games of subjugation and enslavement," or, as Steven Levy already formulated in his early version of a universal Hacker Ethics, act free from "bogus criteria such as degree, age, race or position" (Levy 1984).

In their different "operations", after targeting the *Scientology* sect in their first phase of political communicative action in 2008 - starting with protests against a target that "geeks love to hate" (Coleman 2011) - *Anonymous* engaged in a process of public political negotiations by using the power of speech/code. Examples of other actions read as follows; the movement countered a major child molester webbing in Operation Darknet (Peters 2011), deleting more than 40 websites of the provider *Freedom Hosting* that hosted child pornographic material. They brought websites of German and Austrian neo-Nazi groups down in their Operation Blitzkrieg (Netz gegen Nazis 2011). In 2010's Operation Payback *Anonymous* protested in response to *PayPal*, *Mastercard*, and *Amazon* pulling all support and services for *WikiLeaks*, despite the organization not being charged with any contravention. "This operation, which disabled the websites of some of the world's most powerful corporations for a few days, was exceptional" (Coleman 2011) and *Anonymous* gained a lot of new supporters from a transnational public sphere. It became a popular "political gateway for geeks to take action" (ibid.).

Recently, a branch of *Anonymous* exposed the pro-Kremlin group *Nashi* to run a web of online trolls and bloggers who are paid to praise Vladimir Putin and denigrate and intimidate his opponents. Operation Russia published internal email

correspondence between the first leader of the youth group, and Kristina Potupchik, the group's current spokesperson, and provided evidence for the suspicion against the group (Elder 2012, Stephenson 2012). The list of "operations" is long, but naming only these few suffice in order to provide a basic understanding of *Anonymous'* loose yet coherent political agenda. No real person was harmed by the network's "operations", yet their protest against suppression of freedom of information was in many cases loud enough to gain mainstream media and political attention.

### ***Anonymous and Media Technology – Relations between Artifact and Action***

Unlike the solution offered in the "V" narrative, it is not safe to unmask in the transnational environment in which *Anonymous* acts. Once identified, key figures find themselves in dangerous positions. The hacker, who acted under the pseudonym "Sabu" (identified as Hector Xavier Monsegur, a then 28 year old New Yorker), for example, got charged for acts of communicative protest. Sabu himself decided to turn into an FBI informant and assisted the authorities in arresting other hackers since he got caught in 2011 (Olson 2012). Thus, at times bending national law (Coleman 2011), the mask usually stays on and *Anonymous* activists use different degrees of anonymity in their communication networks as long as possible, staying completely anonymous or acting under pseudonyms. Pseudonymity comes with recognition, which leads to reputation building and the development of an internal hierarchy, which is something the movement claims to avoid. "Because *Anonymous* is in essence a collective, ongoing flash mob, there's no true hierarchy or organizational structure." (Olson 2012: 50ff), Using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) to organize themselves *Anonymous* depends on computer networks in their internal communication while the concept of anonymity as such is independent from the development of media technology.

As ICTs embed specific values and communicative preferences (Ess 2010: 120), the Internet seems to provide space for communication that is at least to some degree anonymous. *Anonymous* also depends on the comparatively easy options to create and share digital pieces of information on a global scale. Their entire information campaign runs via forums, websites, social networking sites, open video platforms or micro blogging services, e.g. *Twitter*. Their iconography and symbolism needs the opportunity of the quick and easy digital copy in order to get distributed as fast and as far as possible. Various operations are promoted by digital flyers, always putting the key symbols of the mask or the headless suited man surrounded by the UN-style peace branches (see picture 1) in a different context, as the example of the anti-Nazi propaganda campaign in Germany and Austria is showing (see pictures 2 and 3). All images, like the following three examples, were initially published by *Anonymous* under a creative commons license – which made it easy to spread their messages online.





1. Two reoccurring *Anonymous* logos.

<http://cdn2->

[b.examiner.com/sites/default/files/styles/image\\_content\\_width/hash/01/b1/01b11a1417c26ec310f17e615155b2aa.jpg?itok=ornFiRhS](http://b.examiner.com/sites/default/files/styles/image_content_width/hash/01/b1/01b11a1417c26ec310f17e615155b2aa.jpg?itok=ornFiRhS) (accessed 12.4.2013)

# Operation Blitzkrieg

Fellow Internet-citizens,

For quite a while now we have been watching our precious Interwebs being used as a platform for ideologies as stupid and dangerous as it gets. The talk is of course of far right partys. We german Anons have decided to tolerate no more these actions.

We hereby call to you to identify the sites where the Nazis gather in your respective country, collect the data and coordinate attacks.

**First action** will be taking place against german extremist right-wing & neo-nazi sites **ROCKNORD.net THIAZI.com WOLF5FRONT.com DIMAI2011.de** on MAY 1 2011.

**Can u accept an uprising of facist hate and violence spreading propaganda through your Internet?**

Get in **Operation Blitzkrieg** IRC channel for coordination & fire your LAZOR!!!!

We are Anonymous.  
We are Legion.  
We do not forgive.  
We do not forget.  
Expect Us.

IRC: **irc.anonops.ru #OpBlitzkrieg**  
WebChat: **<http://is.gd/blitzkrieg>**  
Twitter: **@OpBlitzkrieg**

2. Online flyer calling for support of Operation Blitzkrieg.

<http://anonnews.org/?p=press&a=item&i=896> (accessed 2.5.2013)





3. Online flyer, advertising Operation Blitzkrieg.

[http://www.tagesspiegel.de/images/hackernpd\\_anonymous/4303890/2-format43.jpg](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/images/hackernpd_anonymous/4303890/2-format43.jpg)  
(accessed 12.4.2013)

*Anonymous* quickly created its own set of symbols and images that make it easy for people who are positively responding to their key ideas to join the cause and boost the idea's publicity even further. As Nagenborg puts it "everybody who is willing to pay 11.20 € for such a mask on Amazon can use a camera and speak in the name of *Anonymous*" (Nagenborg 2012, own translation). Digital copies of the messages are easy to reproduce and distribute. Via the citation of the mask and the headless suited man (see picture 1), visual contextualization takes place. *Anonymous'* messages are easily recognized and read in the context of the movement and a connection to the V/Guy Fawkes narrative can be established, too. Similar to icons from traditional religious or political movements (e.g. the Christian cross or Communism's red star), the symbol takes up a life of its own, being used and/or misused in various contexts, yet causing immediate recognition and identification with the respective ideology, narrative or mindset it represents.

### **Junction: Anonymity, *Anonymous* and Journalism**

From the perspective of journalism and journalism studies, *Anonymous* is of particular interest - not only because we witness a special form of activism related to public communication that makes use of modern networked media and communication technologies. It is also the case that the issues of those activists, and especially the question concerning anonymity in the context of public freedom of speech negotiations, are touching the very foundation of our field of public communication. The phenomenon highlights the tensions between the different

levels of censorship and the different dimensions of freedom of communication, or – to put it simply – the question of who is able to publicly utter what in which context and with what impact on the public opinion making process. In addition to this, journalism itself has a long history with the question of how to deal with anonymity in different contexts of journalistic practices. Be it anonymous letters to the editor that were recognized by editorial boards of newspapers, (Saks/Ostrom 1973) or be it the question of using and the (im-)possibility of verification of these in the context of anonymous whistleblowing.

Olson concludes in her study on *Anonymous* that "the press liked reporting on this new powerful phenomenon of a hive that nobody seemed able to quantify" (Olson 2012: 122). This "fascination" with *Anonymous* can be seen in the example of the German press landscape. German correspondent Stephanie Dobberstein (ddp) sent out the very first news agency report on *Anonymous* in August 2008, providing other media outlets with information on protests against *Scientology* in Berlin for the German language press. She gives voice to one person using the pseudonym "David" – "every member of *Anonymous* is called David" (Dobberstein 2008), probably a reference to the David vs. Goliath narration from Christian mythology – who takes part in the protests against the German branch of the *Scientology* sect on a regular basis. Confronted by a member of *Scientology* on the street, "David" claims that the German police recognize his fear of being unmasked and therefore allow him to remain anonymous, despite the prohibition of being covered ("Vermummungsverbot") in the German right of assembly. The report ends with "David's" remark that some other Anons got intimidated by the sect right after their identity was revealed. Dobberstein announces further protests for the following Saturday. This agency report is only taken up by Berlin's newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, and author André Glasmacher reports on the protests on the respective day. He also conducts an interview with one of the protesters, masked and under the pseudonym "Robert Tonlein". He ends his generally positive article on *Anonymous'* protest against the *Scientology* sect with a brief depiction of the success of that day's awareness campaign ("Aufklärungskampf"). What follows in the LexisNexis university archives is about two years of silence in the press – up until *Anonymous* starts to support *WikiLeaks* in 2010. The next article is published in the online version of the *Berliner Morgenpost*, based on news agency material only, right after *PayPal* was down, depicting a series of "cyber attacks" conducted by a "group of hackers" or simply "Wikileaks fans" (*Berliner Morgenpost Online* 2010). In the spring of 2011, several other German newspapers print and upload reports, interviews and analyses on *Anonymous*; furthermore, when *Sony* lost a significant amount of customer data to hackers, speculation whether *Anonymous* was behind it spread through German special interest IT-magazines like *Computerbild*, *PC Welt* and *techchannel.de*.

Whether all articles in the German press are more or less within the spectrum of neutral to positive in their analysis and evaluation of *Anonymous'* communicative actions still needs to be proven or falsified empirically. However, the movement's

mindset and its claim for transparency and total freedom of information seem to appeal to the professional ethics of critical journalists working in a democratic public sphere.

There is, however, a longstanding tradition of skepticism when it comes to anonymous sources in professional journalism in general. Shephard (1994) is asking the question concerning anonymity in journalism in the context of a series of inaccurate stories about the O. J. Simpson case in American media outlets, which were based on anonymous sources. This has reopened the debate about the use and misuse of anonymity in the context of journalistic standards. "Detractors say they [unnamed sources] hurt the media's credibility. Defenders say without them important stories would never be told." (Shephard 1994). *Associated Press* managing editor Darrell Christian explains their stand on anonymity: "There's a legitimate concern on the part of newspapers that they want their readers to believe what they're writing. The best way to do that is to put names with the facts" (ibid.). Here we find a conventionalized way of rhetorically delegating responsibility for the truthfulness of the presented facts from the journalist to the source. Among other effects, it is a way to protect a media organization against libel charges. A New York Times attorney is quoted, claiming that "unnamed sources represent one of the most serious libel threats for news organizations" (ibid.), which is probably why journalists adhere to the above depicted process of delegating responsibility to a named source, especially when working under high pressure. On the other hand, names and named sources might well be relevant for the reader; conclusions can be easily drawn on a possible bias or particular interests that are depicted.

Not only in the coverage of the *Anonymous* movement, but also in other cases where exposing the real name of the source would be too dangerous, journalism does rely on anonymous sources – as Kamalipour (2010) and others depicted in their analyses on media communication during the post-election uprising in Iran 2009, where frequently pseudonymous sources, especially bloggers or micro-bloggers from the protesting regions, were cited by mainstream media. Oftentimes a different perspective from the officially gained information was provided – a valuable addition even without a real source name or location of the source and a starting point for further investigation. One still finds an unresolved and highly case-dependent relationship between journalism and anonymity on which further research could be conducted.

### **Conclusion: Anonymity as a Dimension of Freedom of Communication**

"It is time to stop arguing over whether the Internet empowers individuals and societies, and address the more fundamental and urgent question of how technology should be structured and governed to support the rights and liberties of all the world's Internet users" (MacKinnon, 2011). In this statement, MacKinnon agrees with other freedom of speech researchers such as Warburton (2009), who

conclude that freedom of communication is directly linked to a democratic social order whose major aims are individual deliberation in a social context, equal rights and justice. Beyond any doubt, new communication technologies of the late 20th and early 21st century and related new techniques or practices of communication have an impact on our understanding of the conditions of the concept of freedom of communication. In Germany, anonymity, as one dimension of freedom of communication, is regarded as a protected right and legal scholars such as Bäumlner and van Mutius (2003) critically observe how this right is challenged in the context of the new media environment. Their account on the importance of anonymity in public goes in hand with Bronco's aim, "to ultimately preserve anonymous online communication as an increasingly important form of free speech" (Bronco 2004: 128).

The major argument against anonymity is the presumed lack of responsibility/accountability for one's own actions. This argument was plausibly countered by Nagenborg (2012) who proposed that there is not a lack of responsibility in anonymous public communication, but rather a shift from sender-responsibility to receiver-responsibility in the context of entirely free information. This, alongside the focus of content instead of the person uttering the information, calls for a well-educated and critical recipient who is able to come up with decisions and act according to his own well-informed judgment – quite an Enlightenment ideal. Nagenborg also suggests that the striving for anonymity should not be read as a means to avoid taking responsibility but as a counter strategy against an "overkill of identity politics" – an argument with which he connects his view on *Anonymous* to critical positions on identity politics within the social sciences, especially in the field of Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism, Gender Theory and Critical Theory. Whether authenticity and anonymity count each other out is also questionable in the context of online communication. As one can see in the case of *Anonymous*, a coherent and consistent performance can call for the assumption of authenticity within the public sphere. In terms of coherence and consistency, *Anonymous*, in their play with different levels of anonymity on the scale suggested by Bronco, could provide this type of authenticity without revealing "true names". If authenticity can be understood as "free from any external influences", as suggested by the cultural anthropologist Lindner (1998), anonymity would actually be the only mode of communication that comes close to being authentic in an online environment. In the end, preserving the opportunity for anonymous public communication, especially in the field of political communication, and providing some safety for those who dare speak out in public encourages a culture of free speech while compulsive exposure of one's own identity or "true name" only leads to a culture of silence – which is not at all compatible with democratic negotiation processes.

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