Creating the Conditions for an Intellectually Active People

What Today’s Public Intellectual Can Learn from Anonymous

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Since the emergence of the print revolution, public intellectuals have relied on books, newspapers, and periodicals in order to present their ideas to a broader public. Today, of course, the range of communication technologies deployed by public intellectuals can include not only radio and television but a variety of digital platforms. As a result, public intellectuals have, perhaps inevitably, developed into what some critics describe as “media” intellectuals—intellectuals concerned not merely with ideas but with commercial success, reputation building, and hence with public image. In the digital arena, public intellectuals seeking to market their ideas have become savvy creators and sharers of “sticky” content produced for consumption, discussion, and dissemination by the public at large, whether through the posting of comments or by linking, “liking,” or Twittering. These “Public Intellectuals 2.1,” as Daniel Drezner calls them, actively and strategically utilize the Internet and Web-based platforms, such as blogs, personal websites, or YouTube, to attract and engage their publics, thereby generating what he sees as a potential “renaissance” of the public intellectual (Drezner 2009, 49).

This “new dawn” of digital technology and communication has prompted some, such as media studies scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan, to declare that
“there has never been a better time to be a public intellectual” (Vaidhyanathan 2006). While the array of tools available to the public intellectual has undeniably broadened, such declarations refer primarily to the logistical options available to the intellectual today, which have brought with them not only the potential for an increased output of ideas and opinion but also greater rewards for successful competition in the intellectual marketplace, in which ideas can be branded and commoditized. They speak little, however, to the cultural and political stakes entailed in the use of these new options or to the wants, needs, or character of the publics at whom these efforts are directed. As Alan Hudson (2003, 33) reminds us, “The debate about intellectuals, their worth and seriousness, only makes sense in so far as it distils and gives expression to a much more important subject: the state of public life.”

Much has been written about the current state of public life. Many of those who constitute “the public”: seem to have lost faith in both the moral legitimacy and the practical utility of traditional top-down models of institutional and political organization, which has generated an oppressive sense of powerlessness. This erosion of civic engagement is visible not merely in low voter turnouts but in the rise of a narrow, narcissistic preoccupation with self and self-interest. If the fundamental task of the public intellectual is to create the conditions for what John Stuart Mill ([1859] 2001, 33) called “an intellectually active people”—and if, as Edward Said (1994, xvii) argues, the nature of this task necessitates taking a position of “dissent against the status quo”—then two key questions for today’s “Public Intellectual 2.1” can be articulated. First, what possibilities, and what impediments, do digital media present for a public intellectual’s message of dissent? And, second, in an era of public passivity, how can public intellectuals work to foster the conditions for an “intellectually active” people? In what follows, I will argue that the social phenomenon of “hacktivism,” exemplified in decentralized online communities such as Anonymous, offers some valuable insights for today’s public intellectuals.

The Present Age

Especially in the wake of grassroots democratic movements in, for example, Iran and Tunisia, many critics have expressed concern about the political apathy that prevails in so many Western democratic countries. The degree to which these movements turned on the rapid dissemination of information
has also served to focus international attention on efforts to restrict the free flow of information and on the implications of such practices for democracy. Although the Canadian political and economic context clearly differs quite radically from the circumstances that gave rise to these movements, it is still worth asking whether profound transformative social action is, in the words of Søren Kierkegaard ([1846] 1962, 42), “of all things, the most unthinkable.”

In *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*, political analyst David Taras argues that even at a time when current political events challenge the core of Canadian identity—a time when, arguably, the public most urgently requires a critical media—our national public media habitually fail to provide aggressive critical analysis or to “question the basic assumptions on which the political system rests” (2001, 58). As Taras (2001, 240) warns, a country that allows its media to abandon a commitment to fostering open debate and space for new and possibly controversial ideas creates the conditions for the atrophy of democracy. Writing nearly a century and a half earlier, Mill ([1859] 1986, 33) saw the degradation of the conditions that foster intellectual engagement as symptomatic of an atmosphere of “mental slavery,” one characterized by a pervasive “dread of heterodox speculation” that prevents human beings from realizing their full intellectual capabilities. As he observed: “Where there is a tacit convention that principles are not to be disputed; where the discussion of the greatest questions which can occupy humanity is considered to be closed, we cannot hope to find that generally high scale of mental activity which has made some periods of history so remarkable” (33).

Mill’s statement presaged the stakes at issue along today’s new digital frontiers. Amnesty International’s annual report for 2011 identifies freedom of expression, access to information, and tools of communication as critical to the ability of individuals to challenge repression and claim their human rights and potentials (Amnesty International 2011, xi–xix). As the report illustrates, the possibility of intellectual dissent and the conditions, both cultural and technical, of the public media are inextricably bound to one another. Where Taras, Mill, and Amnesty International converge is in the conviction not only that ideas create realities but that the suppression of ideas destroys the conditions under which it becomes possible to conceive ideas in the first place. Of course, individuals who recognize that their first duty is to follow the path of their intellect have not ceased to exist. Mill’s
Concern, however, was that in a suffocating atmosphere of intellectual conformity, in which dissenting views are suppressed, the public intellect withers. What, then, must be done today to foster the conditions under which hegemonic views can be challenged and the public intellect is able to flourish?

For those who study communication and language, it is impossible to separate content (“What is being said?”) from medium (“How is it being said?”). The efficacy of intellectuals’ efforts to convey messages intended to spur social change thus depends in part on the specific technologies of communication they adopt. An early example of this recognition arrives in Søren Kierkegaard’s essay “The Present Age” (1846), which mounts a scathing critique of “the Press” and its constitutive role in creating and sustaining an illusory “phantom,” the public. In view of today’s media-saturated landscape, it is not surprising that scholars such as philosopher (and webcaster) Hubert Dreyfus (2004) have returned to Kierkegaard’s essay as a means of gaining insight into present-day concerns pertaining to the Internet and the public sphere.

“Ours is the age of advertisement and publicity,” Kierkegaard declared: “Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere” ([1846] 1962, 35). For Kierkegaard, the daily papers of the mid-nineteenth century were instrumental in producing a degrading levelling of society to its lowest common denominator. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1997, 43) note, the press was, for Kierkegaard, “a mass medium that addresses its audience as members of a crowd and that itself helps massify society,” working to produce “a crowd devoid of individuality and independent judgment, their thought determined by the authority of printed words and editorial fiat.” Kierkegaard’s press posits as self-evident what he described as a “monstrous abstraction,” a nothing known as “the public,” made up of “unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization—and yet are held together as a whole” ([1846] 1962, 60). In so doing, the press weakens the connection between individuals and their concrete realities. “A generation, a people, an assembly of the people, a meeting or a man,” Kierkegaard wrote, “are responsible for what they are and can be made ashamed if they are inconstant and unfaithful; but a public remains a public” (62). It is “everything and nothing,” an entity that transforms individuals into a passive “third party” (64), reducing them from moral agents to the status of onlookers.
It is in the lack of connection to the concrete and the tendency to think purely in the abstract, Dreyfus (2004) argues, that Kierkegaard sees the error inherent to the Enlightenment’s call to reason. In this world, despite lacking direct experience, people hold opinions on any and every public issue but are removed from any sense of personal responsibility or obligation to action. As Dreyfus (2004) puts it, “The public sphere thus promotes ubiquitous commentators who deliberately detach themselves from the local practices out of which specific issues grow and in terms of which these issues must be resolved through some sort of committed action.” For Kierkegaard, it is not reflection itself that is evil but “a reflective condition and the deadlock which it involves, by transforming the capacity for action into a means of escape from action” ([1846] 1962, 68). Unlike a tumultuous and passionate revolutionary “age of action,” which storms ahead, setting up new things and tearing down old, a “reflective age” is without passion, “hindering and stifling action as it transforms expressions of strength into a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing, but cunningly empties it of significance” (42). In this passive age, the ideals of revolution and the courage to revolt may be celebrated publicly through abstract calls to action (“Something must be done!”), but, when left to private reflection, individuals mock such decisive action as foolish or condemn it as too risky and find grounds to excuse themselves from the task. For this reason, profound transformative social action becomes “of all things, the most unthinkable” (42).

The Virtual Intellectual

In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), Edward Said argued that for each age and in each place, it is the defining task of public intellectuals to become “outsiders.” He issued a reminder to public intellectuals that (like everyone else) they are deeply embedded in their cultural and historical circumstances. The question then becomes, “To what extent are intellectuals servants of these actualities, to what extent enemies?” (Said 1994, xv). To be servants rather than enemies, intellectuals must work to separate themselves from the ideological frameworks within which they are otherwise imprisoned. The intellectual vocation, Said wrote, consists in “maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along” (23). In other words, liberation comes not from denying one’s social embeddedness but from becoming fully and
continually aware of it. For Said, intellectuals must constantly ask, “How does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?” (88).

In a lecture delivered several years later, interactive media research Geert Lovink (1997) noted that missing from Said’s view of the intellectual as moral agent, as someone who “speaks truth to power,” was “an analysis of the dramatic changes of the public sphere itself.” Recognizing the degree to which knowledge production and distribution had already become inseparably entwined with digital communication networks, Lovink noted that intellectuals could no longer live in a world of paper and hope to have any serious impact. At the same time, he cautioned that “the intellectual of the Media Age should not by definition be identical to the figure of the media personality”—the “intellectual as TV personality,” who “seems to be part of the problem.” The endless proffering of opinions, he argued, simply draws the public “deeper into a status of passive consumers.” Lovink advocated instead for what he called, not a media intellectual, but a “Virtual Intellectual.” Pointing out that virtual implies “ever changing, in constant contact with other e-writers (and readers),” he envisioned that “these new figures will be constituted through their specific mixture of local and global cultures, digitised and non-digitised source material, real and screen-only experiences” (Lovink 1997).

As Lovink (2004, 13) argued some years later, intellectuals working in the realm of the humanities were prone to view technology “from a quasi-outsider’s perspective, assuming that technology and society can still be separated.” But, he wrote, “the Internet is not a parallel world somewhere out there, it is an integral part of society,” and its social networks should be understood as “osmotic interfaces between inside and outside” (9). Virtual intellectuals accordingly locate themselves within technology, adopting a reflexive understanding of their own situation as users of that technology. They recognize that in order to understand “from where” they speak, they must look to the architecture of the communication networks they use and how these technologies function as an inextricable part of social and economic systems. In an era in which “the state of public life” is not only expressed but actively shaped through digital media, the work of the public intellectual likewise cannot be separated from the technologies that dominate our day-to-day lives and mediate both our interactions with others and our process of self-fashioning.
Lovink (1997) suggests that “intellectuals who are only expressing opinions, in the belief that the media-industry (particularly television) still produces common sense content which shapes public opinion, should simply desist—they should boycott all talk shows and instead engage in fundamental research on the ‘state of the media.’” Capable of fluidly traversing both online and “real-world” communications media, the virtual intellectual recognizes that to understand the state of the media is to understand the “state of self” (or selves). But negotiating the relationship of the self to digital media is not an easy task. As social media sites, banks, retailers, employers, and governments, among others, demand personal data that render individuals more visible and transparent, not only is privacy sacrificed but the line between private and public is blurred. As Eva Illouz notes, this blurring of boundaries makes it “virtually impossible to distinguish the rationalization and commodification of selfhood from the capacity of the self to shape and help itself and to engage in deliberation and communication with others” (quoted in Lovink 2011, 42). In other words, processes of self-definition and interpersonal exchange become entangled with the creation and marketing of a public persona. So how does the virtual intellectual escape the temptation to engage in self-promotion and image management?

Mainstream social media, such as Facebook, function by cultivating, stockpiling, and exploiting weak ties—that is, relatively loose links among more densely connected groups. The virtual intellectual seeks instead to escape the web of weak ties and, through participation in intensive network collaborations, to harness the Internet’s potential to disrupt the status quo. These collaborations generally involve a limited number of members, who sometimes remain anonymous and whose goal is to exercise their intellectual freedom in the service of social and political critique—implicit in which is the right of access to information unfettered by censorship. Such networked communities offer an alternative to a collection of autonomous intellectuals struggling to create and maintain a public image.

**Digital Dissent: Hacktivism and Organized Networks**

In 2007, Canadian Policy Research Networks published its findings on low voter turnout among young people (aged 18 to 24) in a report titled *Lost in Translation*. The report, which aggregated the findings of six commissioned research papers on political participation among youth, concluded
that although young people indeed had little interest in voting, there was strong evidence of “small ‘p’ political life.” As the authors of the report noted, young people

are quick to apply online tools and networks to mobilize socially and politically, but often do not identify their activities as being political. They are very impatient with traditional ways of political engagement—they are turned off by political parties and partisan politics, dislike hierarchical approaches to organization and mobilization, and don’t think that formal politics is an effective route to affect change. . . . This generation is much more wired, getting more of its news and information online and from alternative sources, rather than mainstream media. These youth are more likely than older Canadians to participate in political demonstrations, to volunteer and to be a member of a group or organization. They volunteer for different activities and are motivated by different reasons (e.g., reciprocal relationships, skills development, social purposes). They look for engagement that has personal meaning and delivers faster results than traditional routes. (MacKinnon, Pitre, and Watling 2007, vi)

“Youth are not disconnected from politics,” the authors concluded; rather, “it is political institutions, practice and culture that are disconnected from youth” (vii). As they went on to say:

Today’s youth . . . are reinventing civic and political engagement. Unfortunately, their discourse is all too often either not understood or poorly captured by traditional surveys, academic research and their Baby Boomer parents. In this sense, their ideas and actions are misunderstood or misrepresented. They seem to get lost in translation between the new and the old—between their perspectives and traditional notions about political and civic engagement. (8)

Although the authors recognize that young people are legitimately participating in political action, what is absent from their list of alternative political engagements is the act of abstaining from voting itself. Because the primary objective of their research is to figure out how to increase voter turnout among youth, the researchers approach this demographic with the
assumption that something is already wrong with young people—that they are not doing something they should and that what they are doing takes substandard forms (“small ‘p’ political life”). The authors seem reluctant to acknowledge that, if young people are “turned off by political parties and partisan politics,” then perhaps it is the Canadian electoral process itself that creates the structural condition for what is perceived as their failure to vote. Through this lens, young people can be seen, not as individuals lost in translation, but rather as competent actors who have concluded that, although conventional institutions, including those of government, may still offer some absolute advantages, “the relative advantages of those institutions have disappeared—relative, that is, to the direct efforts of the people they represent” (Shirky 2008, 23).

It is in response to such frustrations that a particular form of “small ‘p’ political life” has assumed a pivotal position in today’s social and political arena. With a healthy representation of young people, including some too young to vote, “hacktivism” has become one method of political resistance and protest. In Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause? Tim Jordan and Paul Taylor (2004, 172) describe hacktivism as “the first social movement of virtuality.” Combining political dissent with the technical know-how needed to bypass computer network security systems and/or overload web servers, the hacktivist stands at the intersection of what Jordan and Paul describe as “three divergent currents: hacking, informational societies and modern social protest and resistance” (2). As “activism gone electronic,” hacktivism represents “the emergence of popular political action, of the self-activity of groups of people, in cyberspace” (1). Inspired in part by grassroots political movements, hacktivism exploits the potential of online community platforms to serve as vehicles for dissent, opposing itself to conventional models of organizing collective action that operate within the framework of mainstream institutions.

As Internet researcher Clay Shirky (2005) explains, traditional institutional structures are both inefficient and exclusionary, chiefly because the costs involved in coordinating individuals are generally high. As he puts it, institutional operational models, structured typically around centralized decision making, hierarchical power structures, a specialized professional class and capital intense operations; inherently goal oriented, inefficient, non-transparent, and exclusionary, are becoming “incoherent” entities due to cultural and power shifts engendered by the advent of new media, ICTs,
e-mail, the Internet, and social networking platforms, based as they are in communicating, sharing, and above all, collaboration.

In contrast to institutions, which must develop an infrastructure capable of coordinating individuals, global communications technologies have made it possible, he argues, to create organizations that build collaboration into the infrastructure—“to design systems that coordinate the output of the group as a by-product of the operating of the system, without regard to institutional models.” As not only users but developers of these technologies, hacktivists have the capacity to develop the communications infrastructure necessary to generate and sustain self-organizing communities. Moreover, as Shirky notes, conventional institutions are weighted toward those who make the largest contribution—toward the most productive employees—and so are incapable of capturing the value of a “distributed class” of individuals who contribute to the whole in only a small, but potentially significant, way. Inherent to the operation of these new social platforms and networks, however, are protocols that serve to enable individual contributions, no matter how limited, rather than acting as an obstacle to them (Shirky 2005).

This form of virtual community building, characterized by a diverse membership operating on a global scale for a wide range of purposes, is not, of course, unique to hacktivists. Numerous digitally based social networks and communities, such as Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, or Flickr, have similar attributes. The advantage of these communities, according to Charles Leadbeater (2008, 19), is that they function like “a vast bird’s nest.” Constructed by their users, these communities allow people to come and go, contributing something if they wish, with the value of their contributions judged quality rather than quantity. Contrary to the notion that hierarchal organizational structures ensure efficiency and order, Leadbeater suggests that the success of what he calls “We-Think” communities—those able to harness the energy and creativity of individuals en masse—lies precisely in their lack of any rigid, top-down structure of the sort in which “you look up to someone to tell you what to do.” As he explains (2008, 80): “We-Think succeeds by creating self-governing communities who make the most of their diverse knowledge without being overwhelmed by their differences. That is possible only if these communities are joined around a simple animating goal, if they develop legitimate ways to review and sort ideas and if they have the right kind of leadership.” These communities do not lose their
way or cease to function, devolving into chaos, provided they are able to establish the conditions that allow for “responsible self-governance” (79).

Although such networks have the virtue of enabling the construction of collaborative relations, one must be mindful of the technological architecture of these relationships. Writing of “the conjunction between software cultures and social desires,” Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter (2013, 10) point out that “crucial to this relation is the question of algorithmic architectures—something largely overlooked by many activist movements who adopt, in what seems a carefree manner, commercially motivated and politically compromised social media software such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+.” Especially in light of revelations pertaining to the electronic surveillance activities of the US National Security Agency, sites such as Facebook have shown themselves to be far from transparent in terms of the architecture of their algorithms and the degree to which personal information is stored, used, shared, and sold. Indeed, as Lovink and Rossiter (2013, 10) note, commercial social media platforms have a number of drawbacks: “security of communication (infiltration, surveillance and a wilful disregard of privacy), logic or structure of communication (micro-chatting among friends coupled with broadcasting notices for the many subscribed to the cloud), and an economy of ‘free labour’ (user generated data, or ‘the social production of value’).”

The tendency of new and potentially subversive technologies to be co-opted by existing commercial and institutional structures is well recognized. Writing in 2004—the year that Facebook was founded—Lovink and Florian Schneider warned that “power responds to the pressure of increasing mobility and communications of the multitudes with attempts to regulate them in the framework of traditional regimes.” As a result, networks lose their revolutionary capacity. “After an exciting first phase of introductions and debates,” they write, “networks are put to the test: either they transform into a body that is capable to act, or they remain stable on a flatline of information exchange, with the occasional reply of an individual who dares to disagree.” Far from harnessing the power of connection in the service of liberation, networking can instead produce “a rampant will to powerlessness that escapes the idea of collective progress” (Lovink and Schneider 2004).

Lovink and Rossiter (2013) accordingly draw a contrast between mainstream social media and what they call “organised networks.” Rather than
“exploiting the weak ties of the dominant social networking sites,” such networks “emphasise intensive collaborations within a limited group of engaged users” (2013, 10). As they note, commercial social media foster a culture of monitoring, in which participants constantly keep tabs on one another’s activities. In contrast, organized networks

radically break with the updating and monitoring logic and shift attention away from watching and following diffuse networks to getting things done, together. There is more in this world than self-improvement and empowerment. Network architectures need to move away from the user-centered approach and instead develop a task-related design undertaken in protected mode. (Lovink and Rossiter 2013, 11; emphasis added)

The hacktivist community collectively identified as “Anonymous” offers an especially useful illustration of a network architecture oriented not toward users but toward the task of “getting things done.”

**We Are Anonymous**

It is perhaps most fruitful to begin with a discussion of what Anonymous is not. Anonymous is not a cohesive group or club, with a clearly defined membership. Rather, it is best described as a loose and dynamic collection of online chat groups whose participants are able to move from one group to another, from one discussion to another, as they please. Anonymous is not a centralized entity but a distributed aggregate of individuals from around the globe. Nor, of course, is Anonymous a social media site on the Facebook model. Anonymous relies on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels—forums that allow for real-time Internet chatting—where anonymous participants (“anons”) come together to suggest targets, debate strategies, and plan attacks, as well as simply to exchange ideas and joke around.

Anonymous is best known for its politically motivated hacking and service disruption activities, which have been directed against a wide array of specific targets. Depending on the issue and the target, the personal and political stakes involved for those participating may vary. As Leadbeater suggested, however, the success of groups like Anonymous depend in part on the fact that, despite their diversity, participants are unified around
“a simple animating goal.” In the case of Anonymous, namely, to combat efforts, whether on the part of governments or private organizations, to restrict access to information, to engage in online forms of surveillance, and to circumscribe political rights and freedoms. In accordance with the non-hierarchical structure of the “hive mind,” or Leadbeater’s “We-Think” communities, Anonymous has no recognized leaders. In fact, individuals who try to assume such a position within the community are quickly reminded of their place and can be removed from the IRC—a process that well illustrates democratic self-governance. Even The Economist, a publication not known for its subversive character, described Anonymous as “24-hour Athenian democracy” (Economist 2010).

Anonymous’s signature strategy consists of a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack, in which large numbers of personal computers tethered by software simultaneously send a high volume of traffic to a targeted website. These tsunami waves of site traffic overwhelm the web server, causing it to crash, thereby rendering the website non-operational for a period of minutes or hours. Perhaps not surprisingly, these attacks have been characterized in the media and by government and corporate representatives as crimes, even as acts of terrorism. In a more apt analogy, however, “DDoSing” might be thought of as an online sit-in meant to interrupt Web services, much like a physical sit-in can block traffic or prevent people from accessing a building.

Properly speaking, a DDoS attack is not hacktivism, as it does not actually involve hacking into computers. Nor, although characterized as a hacktivist group, does Anonymous consist solely or even primarily of computer hackers. Anyone, with or without hacking knowledge, can contribute to its operations.3 Another misconception about Anonymous, often perpetuated in the mainstream media, is that the group is made up of nefarious youths, criminals, Internet thugs, and immature computer geeks who are more interested in causing trouble than in serious political action. But it is not clear that any evidence exists to support such characterizations. An unknown number of people participate in Anonymous, and, as Gabriella Coleman (2010b) notes, some of them “don’t even bother to leave a trace of their thoughts, motivations, or reactions,” while those that do express divergent opinions. Under such circumstances, it is simply not possible to generalize about their intentions, their motivations for participating, or their character as individuals. Contrasting Anonymous IRC chat
with exchanges among Anonymous participants using Pirate Pad (a type of collaborative writing software), Coleman argues that “the documents and conversation on Pirate Pad reflect a calmer, more deliberate and deliberative side of Anonymous,” indicating that at least “some of the participants are engaged in strategic and political thinking.” Viewed from this perspective, participants certainly do not appear like adolescent troublemakers but “more like a group of seasoned political activists, debating the merits and demerits of actions and targets” (Coleman 2010b).

Anonymous began as a popular and anonymous image board called “4chan.” Initially, the group was not especially known for political actions but mainly for “trolling” (that is, invading and disrupting online discussions), DDoSing, and making public the personal information of targeted individuals. The motivation for such attacks was “lulz,” a variant of the messaging abbreviation “LOL” (“laugh out loud”) that refers specifically to laughter at another person’s embarrassment or upset. Early in 2008, however, Anonymous turned its attention from trolling and pranking to the Church of Scientology, after the church threatened to take legal action against YouTube and other websites that had refused to take down a leaked video that featured actor Tom Cruise extolling the virtues of Scientology and was, the church claimed, intended for internal circulation only. In response to this attempt to interfere with the ideal of a free Internet, in January 2008, Anonymous led a series of “raids” against the Church of Scientology. In the wake of these raids, the Anonymous discussion boards took a reflective turn, with participants debating the meaning and purpose of their pranking. After much online debate, participants decided to organize a global day of action. On 10 February 2008, more than six thousand people took part in protests, many of them held in front of Scientology churches, in cities in North America, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. According to Coleman (Goodman 2011), these early protests differed from the usual street protests in that the marchers seemed to focus less on articulating political messages and more on creating a carnivalesque atmosphere, with many protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks. The masks, which have since become emblematic of Anonymous, are more than merely a disguise: they allude to the series of comics (and subsequent film) V for Vendetta, about an anarchist revolutionary, disguised behind a Guy Fawkes mask, who plans extreme and theatrical campaigns of violence against the police state in which he lives, hoping to issue a call to others to stand up and rule themselves.
Although its initial protests had a flavour of mischief making, Anonymous has evolved, changing tactics and strategies and collectively developing more efficient methods of mobilizing individuals and attracting media attention to its activities. In December 2010, Anonymous came to the awareness of the general public when it launched a massive protest, Operation Payback, against anti-piracy organizations and in defence of WikiLeaks. In response to WikiLeaks’s publication of a cache of confidential diplomatic correspondence, the US government had called on PayPal, Bank of America, MasterCard, Visa, and Amazon to stop processing donations to WikiLeaks, despite the fact that WikiLeaks had not (and still has not) been charged with any legal infractions. Participation in the solidarity campaign marked a milestone in the history of Internet Relay Chat channels. Some seven thousand online anons succeeded for days in disabling the websites of some of the world’s most powerful corporations, an accomplishment that speaks to Anonymous’s organizational capacity to choose targets collectively, through polling, and to coordinate action by distributing collectively written documents indicating who is to be attacked, and who isn’t, and issuing reminders about the importance of abiding by group decisions.

In the summer of 2011, Anonymous groups offered support to the Arab Spring uprising by hacking into and taking down government websites in both Tunisia and Egypt. Anonymous contingents were also instrumental in gathering support for the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protest, initiated by the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine Adbusters, on 17 September 2011. Nathan Schneider (2011) describes OWS’s decision-making body, the General Assembly, as “a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified-consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought,” one that is “akin to the assemblies that have been driving recent social movements around the world.” A similar approach to decision making is practiced on Anonymous’s IRC channels. Of course, Anonymous cannot be credited for the success of the Tunisian revolution or the draw of thousands of participants to OWS and its offspring Occupy movements, although many anons—some wearing their trademark Guy Fawkes masks—took part in the occupations. However, the fact that recent social and political movements have relied heavily on digital modes of communication to develop and coordinate actions suggests the real-world, “away from keyboard” possibilities that exist when the weak ties created by social media platforms are animated by a commitment among users to ideas and shared desires.
According to Dreyfus (2004), “Kierkegaard would surely argue that, while the Internet, like the Press, allows unconditional commitments, far from encouraging them, it tends to turn all of life into a risk free game,” one in which commitments are imagined more than enacted. Dreyfus goes on to suggest that “the test as to whether one had acquired an unconditional commitment would come if one had the incentive and courage to transfer what one had learned to the real world. Then one would confront what Kierkegaard calls ‘the danger and the harsh judgment of existence.’” I would argue that, far from remaining safely enclosed within a virtual world of images and abstract ideas, Anonymous is very much grounded in the real world. In recent years, Anonymous groups have targeted numerous individuals, organizations, and government websites worldwide in an effort to stimulate commitment and prompt action on a broad range of issues, from centralized data storage and surveillance regimes, to censorship and the muffling of free speech, to anti-gay legislation and efforts of school authorities to cover up a case of gang rape, to political repression and struggles for democracy and human rights.

At the same time, campaigns like Operation Payback serve as a sobering reminder of the risks entailed in online acts of civil disobedience. On 6 October 2013, thirteen individuals were indicted for their part in Anonymous’s DDoS attacks on the Motion Picture Association of America, the Recording Industry Association of America, PayPal, Bank of America, MasterCard, Visa, and Amazon. The software used in DDoS attacks automatically encodes the sender’s IP address, which means that senders must take steps to disguise their address prior to launching an attack. Evidently, these individuals neglected to do so, and, as a result, US federal authorities were able to trace the IP addresses and thus determine the identities of those involved. The lesson learned, if it was not already understood, is that anonymity must be actively pursued and protected. Anonymity does not dissolve identity and personal integrity, nor does it exempt individuals from responsibility and the need for commitment. The participation of anonymous individuals in collective protest is an act of resistance—one that should prompt people to ask not “What is the person wearing the mask hiding?” but “What is the masked performer trying to tell us?”
For Kierkegaard, the ultimate work of the enlightened individual was not to assume a position of authority and attempt to guide the lost masses toward wisdom. Although in revolutionary times, he argued, authoritative figures rose to lead the masses, in a passive age, characterized by the spirit of levelling, the role of the “man of distinction,” the man who is “recognizable,” is no longer to lead ([1846] 1962, 80). “From now on,” he wrote, “the great man, the leader (according to his position) will be without authority . . . he will be unrecognizable” (80). Only by indirectly, anonymously, helping individuals as individuals—not as marginalized groups or unfortunate masses in need of liberation—and labouring to conceal their own efforts from those they help can these unrecognizable leaders assist in the awakening of others (82).

Recognizing the need for unrecognizability, Kierkegaard often chose to publish under pseudonyms. Especially in his so-called aesthetic writings, those aimed at a relatively popular audience, Kierkegaard sought to disguise his authorial voice—to give readers no clue to his identity—so as to prompt them to think for themselves. In Kierkegaard’s view, individuals first had to be liberated from the suffocating abstraction of “the public” before they could come together as ethical citizens around a commitment, not to each other, but to the ideas they shared: “When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them” (62). In contrast to the “phantom” public shaped by a dominating “Press,” individuals who unite around a commitment to ideas do not vanish into the crowd; they continue to exist as distinct individuals, interacting with other individuals to form genuine, concrete communities.

Anonymous, I would argue, introduces the public intellectual not only to the power of network-coordinated activities but to “concrete” communities in a new form, one that is, ironically, virtual. If the role of the public intellectual as opinion leader and authoritative figure has indeed waned, and if the controlling interests of commerce and normative institutions compromise the legitimacy of autonomous intellectual work, then perhaps it is time for the public intellectual to collaborate, engaging with others in
communities formed around a shared commitment, and, moreover, to do so anonymously—to remain unrecognizable, rather than seeking a marketable public identity. In other words, perhaps public intellectuals should consider a shift from autonomy to anonymity. As Lovink (2011, 46) argues, this mode of engagement—anonymity in the online context—affords an opportunity for the virtual intellectual to “dismantle the performance of self and self-disclosure” and to “recoup an energy of metamorphosis.”

In short, the lesson here is not that public intellectuals should become hacktivists or emulate the disruptive “shock” tactics of Anonymous or even necessarily participate in concrete political actions, though these remain avenues of participation. Rather, in a passive age, one distracted by the superficiality of images, they must seek ways to keep the spirit of dissent alive. As Lovink suggests, by choosing anonymity, the virtual intellectual also works to establish the conditions under which others can resist institutional demands for visibility and transparency. Perhaps for the present age, then, the most essential trait of a public intellectual is a commitment to understanding his or her own position in today’s economy of identity management and consumption. To the extent that public intellectuals can forgo the temptation to be drawn into that economy and choose instead to exploit the collaborative potential of digital media, they may help to create the conditions from which an intellectually active people can emerge.

Notes

1 This phrase is from a lecture Leadbeater gave on decentralized models of organization. A videotape of the lecture, “Charles Leadbeater: Organizations and Democracy” (UsNowFilm, 2008) is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6v5FVNqhdNk. The phrase occurs 44 seconds into the talk.

2 I am indebted to the work of Gabriella Coleman, as well as to her comments during a Democracy Now! interview (Goodman 2011), for the snapshot of Anonymous that I present here. Coleman, a cultural anthropologist, has been following hackers, hacktivists, and online forums such as Anonymous since 2002.

3 Anonymous has created a video titled How to Join Anonymous: A Beginner’s Guide (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQk14FLDPZg), which begins by explaining that one can’t join Anonymous, as it isn’t an organization. It advises interested individuals that Anonymous has no
centralized infrastructure but instead uses existing Internet social networks and that, while this could change, the most active groups currently exist on Facebook, Twitter, and IRC and can be found by looking for key terms such as “Anonymous” or “AnonOps.”

Image boards are similar to online bulletin boards, which are subdivided into various topics based on user interest. But, unlike text-based forums, image boards are centred around the posting of pictures and images.

References


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