



Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous

Gabriella Coleman

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“Easily the best book on Anonymous.” —Julian Assange.

Here is the ultimate book on the worldwide movement of hackers, pranksters, and activists that operates under the non-name Anonymous, by the writer the Huffington Post says “knows all of Anonymous’ deepest, darkest secrets.” Half a dozen years ago, anthropologist Gabriella Coleman set out to study the rise of this global phenomenon just as some of its members were turning to political protest and dangerous disruption (before Anonymous shot to fame as a key player in the battles over WikiLeaks, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street). She ended up becoming so closely connected to Anonymous that the tricky story of her inside-outside status as Anon confidante, interpreter, and erstwhile mouthpiece forms one of the themes of this witty and entirely engrossing book. The narrative brims with details unearthed from within a notoriously mysterious subculture, whose semi-legendary tricksters – such as Topiary, tflow, Anachaos, and Sabu – emerge as complex, diverse, politically and culturally sophisticated people. Propelled by years of chats and encounters with a multitude of hackers, including imprisoned activist Jeremy Hammond and the double agent who helped put him away, Hector Monsegur, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* is filled with insights into the meaning of digital activism and little understood facets of culture in the Internet age, including the history of “trolling,” the ethics and metaphysics of hacking, and the origins and manifold meanings of “the lulz.”

Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous Details

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From Reader Review Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous for online ebook

Coral says

Loving this read! Fascinating look into the movement Anonymous. 50% done and an incredible book analyzing Anonymous and it's activism.

I would give this more stars if I could. It's one of my best reads for 2014. I loved the writing style and LOVED the working in of broader themes that links Anonymous within the perspective of a society's culture. I was riveted. It was fascinating. It was also shocking at how much they have answered the need for political protest with all the oversteps the government has taken. I'm an old school war protester and I have to say that our generation has had to do some soul searching about effectiveness. What's the point of being on the right side of history if you can't change things? How do you protest things that aren't even explicit or debated upon as a country? How do you bring them to the forefront so they can be debated? It's inspiring to see at least some answers and innovations coming from a younger, vibrant generation. This book introduced me to so many new topics and ways to get involved or at least see what activists are doing for change. Thank you for such a meaningful, thoughtful, and insightful book. I highlighted passages and will re-read for inspiration and ideas!

Yzabel Ginsberg says

(I got a copy courtesy of NetGalley, in exchange for a honest review.)

An interesting read, but one that I found rather hard to read all at once—probably because it felt pretty dense and dry, with a lot of information that seemed to meander at times. I guess this was kind of unavoidable, because there is just so much to learn, to research, to take into account when studying such a broad subject, involving so many people, whose approaches and means of actions are as different as each individual in the lot. Nevertheless, I only managed to read it little bits by little bits.

The book allows for a better understanding of some of the best known cases in which Anonymous (as various groups) was involved, like Chanology and WikiLeaks, among others. This is a double-edged sword, though, in that it is useful if you know at least little... but if you know nothing at all, it's going to be very confusing.

On the other hand, the author appeared as genuinely fascinated by her research. She made a point of trying to get in (well, as "in" as possible—clearly she couldn't "get" everything, especially not what predated the 2006-2007 years) to get a better understanding of her topic, and to cast a more critical eye on a lot of tricky aspects surrounding Anonymous as a whole: people who got access to sensitive data and exposed it, people who dabbled on the fringes, people who supported the actions labelled as "Anonymous", etc. I was expecting more bias, but she also took care of mentioning some of the (official, governmental) moves made against certain participants in the movement, without necessarily endorsing them as "*the* thing to do against the Bad Hackers (because that's what I'm supposed to say to be on the right side of the law)". Granted, she didn't avoid all the pitfalls; however, her research in general could have been much more biased, and fortunately wasn't.

Linda Quick says

This is a meticulously researched and documented book about the group Anonymous, including several notorious hackers. The author is an anthropologist and wrote the book in a style (I can only assume) that would be what fellow anthropologists would expect to read. It is very dry and detailed.

When I got this book, I was excited to read about it and learn about Anonymous from a legitimate source. Unfortunately, because it was so dry and detailed, I found myself having difficulty finishing it - I found myself skimming entire chapters and skipping around the book. If you are looking for an exhaustive reference on the topic, this might be an excellent choice. If you are simply interested in the topic, this might not be for you.

Thank you to Netgalley for providing a complementary ARC in exchange for my honest review.

Evan Snyder says

I heard Gabriella Coleman's keynote about Anonymous at PyCon 2015, which was one of my favorite sessions of the conference. I picked up her book to learn more.

In general, she presents a really interesting, well-researched profile of Anonymous, starting as the lulz-infused spawn of 4chan and eventually fashioning themselves a self-appointed squad of cyber vigilante justice. The social justice penchant emerges over several years and a few charismatic individuals actually hold much sway in this supposedly "leaderless" movement.

There are some contradictions about Anonymous as an organization that just don't sit quite right with me.

- * Many people in Anonymous are surprisingly blasé about security. In many DDOS efforts, individuals downloaded software like LOIC, took random assurance from the internet that it was entirely "safe" and their identity couldn't be uncovered (via IP address). I was distressed by the lack of personal responsibility and perceived misconduct against them by the Anonymous operation itself and/or law enforcement. Some causes are important, and some might merit going outside the laws; however, you should understand and be willing to accept the consequences.

- * Although the group often works against "the Man," they took the Guy Fawkes mask from the blockbuster film "V for Vendetta." Several of their hacks were against large studios, despite their symbolism having popularity thanks to such studios. Lack of self-awareness here, in their core symbolism, speaks poorly for their ability to be aware about much else.

- * What makes you Anonymous anyway? During #antisecon, one user Lamaline_5mg hops on Anonymous IRC, offers dox information from a hack, crafts media messaging around it...then claims "this is not Anonymous." Sounds to me like you are declaring yourself with Anonymous by those actions. I dislike that such equivocation is permissible.

Perhaps I am holding them to too high of a standard. But they are certainly taking on the Hactivist mantle and so I will judge them accordingly. Even though some of these items originated from earlier Anonymous, the causal culture has remained alongside the new, loftier goals.

Coleman proved to be more of an Anonymous sympathizer than I expected. While I was not surprised for her to think some of their causes are justified, she appeared rather forgiving of their illegal enterprises, despite taking great measures to ensure to not turn herself into an accessory or would-be informant. I do not suggest that she would go so far as to condone these measures, just as she came to know the organization more deeply, the tone seemed to shift a bit from very objective to more supportive. At that inflection point, the

reading started to drag a bit for me as Coleman became attached to individuals and covered more detailed anecdotes about their interactions than interested me.

David Dinaburg says

Federal testing requirements are being challenged throughout New York State in what has been blandly named the opt-out movement. “Opt-out” has the slick polish of an ungraspable term, one with all the language-bending signifiers unsubtly employed by the “pro-life” movement; it vilifies the other side simply for existing. I am not a middle schooler—nor do I have one—but the test idyll revolves around results as metric, not label. Tests are practice for the real world, a consequence-free way of discovering your weaknesses and talents. That test results have a tendency to elide into pejorative shorthand labels for students is a not a per se fault with the tests, but the way they are applied; as a characteristic, a “C” students become a noun and is summarily dismissed.

While I agree the whole system needs a change—because students, much like anything else, cannot be reduced to numbers—not having tests at all seems counterproductive. The reduction of people into data is the Zeitgeist; we require information to feed the algorithms that run the modern information economy, and machines can only process inputs of ones and zeroes. But a useful testing environment would make a perfect score unobtainable; there is room for growth in all things, including—especially—in knowledge. Removing the gleaming pedestal that is pointless perfection would do wonders for the self-esteem-focused learning that is currently in place; if you’re the type of person that ties achievement to identity, than any result that falls short of perfection is world-shattering. You as a person become worth less than you were before receiving tarnishing results. So it is better to avoid—not to try—something at which you don’t know you will succeed. If you’re never striving—and never improving—eventually natural talent will fizzle. What modern testing is teaching is not to try if you cannot be perfect; opt-out if you think you won’t like the results.

A cult of perfectionism does not teach owning one’s own mistakes. Allowing space for ignorance is an even more difficult skill; it strips away any excuse that you are not at fault for your own actions. Even admitting that you didn’t know something—a cool bar, a new band, a type of food—can be a lesson in ego. DUMBO, besides being an adorable baby elephant, is an acronym for a New York City neighborhood— “Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.” It is the little triangle between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, on the Brooklyn side. For whatever reason, I have always thought it was the portion of Chinatown that is situated literally beneath the Manhattan Bridge itself, on the Manhattan side. Simply, factually, wrong.

While I was reading *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* I had to remind myself of the fact that, though we all strive for perfection, ain’t none of us gonna make it there:

He was one of the first individuals from AnonOps I met “afk” (“away from the keyboards,” in IRC parlance), a pleasure I have since enjoyed on multiple occasions.

As far as I know, AFK means “away from keyboard,” as in, “Hey, I’m afk getting a sandwich.” In this aforementioned instance, I would have chosen “IRL” (“in real life”). This little blip caused me to look askance at the whole book; I viewed the misstep as a signifier of the author’s non-native status in the world of online nerdery. Which, I have to say, is seriously fucked up of me.

To begin with, I could very easily be incorrect. “AFK” means my version of “afk” in *Everquest* or AIM. It might not mean that in IRC chat, which I admittedly don’t use. Or on 4chan, where I’ve never been. Just because I think “AFK” implies temporary absence (“afk, using the toilet”) rather than physical locationality (“I like paper books, so I do most of my reading afk.”) doesn’t make it so. Additionally, even if I am technically correct, it doesn’t negate the intense and amazing amount of work the author put into this tome.

And while the book itself lacks the erudition of *The Coming Swarm*—which felt like a technical book for a technical audience—it hits a lot of the a lot of the same notes:

Anonymous remained hyperactively involved with the Steubenville assault on Twitter, until two teenagers were found guilty of rape in May 2013. One defendant received the minimum sentence: one year in a juvenile correctional facility. The other was sentenced to two years. In November 2013, four Steubenville residents, including the school superintendent, were subsequently charged for covering up evidence of another, earlier rape case, according to the *New York Times*. The FBI raided Lostutter in June 2013, and he is facing indictment under the CFAA; Noah McHugh was allegedly arrested earlier in February. If convicted, they face much longer prison sentences than the rapists.

The same notes that remain rather sickening. What differentiates *Hacker Hoaxer* is the humanization element—*Swarm* presents DDoS actions and internet protesters as, well, a swarm; *Hacker Hoaxer* dissects the mass movement, nearly de-anonymizing Anonymous. The two books are the inverse of the same issue; one takes individuals and presents them as a political movement while the other takes a movement and breaks it down into individuals.

When *Hacker Hoaxer* begins its technical chatter, I remember balking: if the author doesn't know what "AFK" means, why should I trust her breakdown of a botnet?

In the botnet world there is an ongoing struggle over who has the most bots, the most bandwidth, and the best-infected machines (university, corporate, and government computers tend to be on better bandwidth).

This competition is so fierce that botnet herders will often try to take over other botnets. On the other side of the fence, law enforcement agencies and individual organizations that are fighting spam also struggle to take over botnets in order to neutralize them. This is not a trivial thing to do. One has to first identify the C&C. If you can figure out where the bots get their commands from, you can join the IRC channel, masquerading as a compromised machine, and wait to receive a command from the botnet herder. If the botnet herder sends an authentication alongside the command, you may have the password necessary to issues commands to the entire botnet yourself.

This is, again, simply poor reasoning on my end. My pushback was unfair, and I injured only myself by not accepting the knowledge as proffered. I should not extrapolate; being skeptical or using critical thinking doesn't mean being dismissive of unrelated information because of a rather pedantic usage differentiation. I have, on more than one occasion, told both clients and friends that the large digital clock on the south end of Union Square in New York is a string of random integers—an art installation representing the random fiat nature of how we label and break down time in the modern era. And while I like my interpretation of the Metronome—as that clock is named—it is, in fact, a clock and there is nothing arbitrary about the digits. C'est la vie.

The horror of the form that the government monopoly on force is taking in cyberspace is getting more and more mainstream coverage and attention:

Thanks to Edward Snowden's NSA mega-leaks in 2013, we know that in the summer of 2011, Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) targetted AnonOps' communications infrastructure. A GCHQ special unit called the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG)—which also engages in COINTELPRO-type meddling—launched DDoS attacks against Anonymous, calling it them [sic] "OpWealth" and "Rolling Thunder."

This was the first known instance of a Western government secretly using DDoS—criminalized in the UK and the US—as a tactic against its own citizens. GCHQ claimed that its operation was a success; the leaked slides boast that as a result of its DDoS or AnonOps’ IRC, “80% of those messaged where [sic] not in the IRC channels 1 month later.” By this time, UK government had already arrested British participants for the same act. One of those arrested, Chris Weatherhead, aka “Nerdo,” was a central and much beloved AnonOps operator. Eventually, he would receive an eighteen-month sentence for his role in the DDoS campaign “Avenge Assange/Operation Payback.” He was not found guilty of engaging in an actual DDoS itself, but of aiding in the operation by running the IRC server. The British government, on the other hand, has faced no sanction for DDoSing activists. The law, clearly, is not applied equally. As Weatherhead put it on Twitter when he read the news: “My government used a DDoS attack against servers I owned, and then convicted me of conducting DDoS attacks. Seriously, what the fucking fuck?”

Onlookers might, at first blush, call the vigilantism of Anonymous too harsh or unproductive or simply wrong; as a movement they are not choosing to opt-out but instead are facing the mistakes and injustice and unbalanced nature of State authoritarianism:

By telling these characters’ stories, lessons emerge, not through dry edicts but, instead, thought fascinating, often audacious, tales of exploits. Trickster lore may be patently mythic, but it bears remembering that, at one point, it was spun by human hands. My role has been to nudge forward this process of historical and political myth-making—already evident in the routine functioning of an entity constituted by adept artists, contemporary myth-makers, and concoctors of illusion.

The Guy Fawkes mask—the mask that can cover the hacker, the hoaxer, the whistleblower, or the spy in equal measure—is the modern equivalent of why Robin Hood and his merry men chose to wear gaudy green. Our modern economy is driven by the buying and selling of information about individual preferences, habits, and tastes; choosing to be anonymous—to don the mask—is the same as cloaking yourself in luxury.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

As someone with a deep fondness for hackers and activists, and being a person follows several versions of Anonymous in Twitter because I feel it is more informative than the regular news, I jumped on the chance to read this book.

Here is a blurb from the publisher summary:

"Half a dozen years ago, anthropologist Gabriella Coleman set out to study the rise of this global phenomenon just as some of its members were turning to political protest and dangerous disruption (before Anonymous shot to fame as a key player in the battles over WikiLeaks, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street). She ended up becoming so closely connected to Anonymous that the tricky story of her inside–outside status as Anon confidante, interpreter, and erstwhile mouthpiece forms one of the themes of this witty and entirely engrossing book."

It is important to note that the author is an anthropologist. This indicates a very specific type of training, both in research and writing. She tries very hard to write the book for a popular audience, and succeeds most of

the time. What doesn't change is the importance she places on understanding a culture from the inside, to become as much of an "insider" as possible. This is what makes this book different from other books or news reports about Anonymous, in my opinion. While she could only present the story she had access to (and with Anonymous, this is rarely everything!), she does a much better job at capturing the breadth that is Anonymous, from lulz to activism, than most people have.

She started hanging out in IRC around the time that Anonymous focused their attention on the Church of Scientology, and kept up with them through Tunisia, WikiLeaks, Egypt, Occupy Wallstreet, and a bunch of arrests and offshoots from Anonymous. There is a lot of information in this book, and part of me wishes she hadn't tried to do quite so much, but I would have had a hard time knowing what could/should be kept out.

Anonymous, in whatever form, and groups like it, may be the only people left really looking to protect privacy of individuals. I have appreciated their pooled strength in fighting censorship and inequality, but this book taught me a lot more about the lighter side of anyone who calls themselves Anonymous. I grow more and more concerned about the unbalanced fight the FBI and other United States government agencies are waging against hackers.

waves to the NSA

Alemanita says

3,5/5. El tema me fascina, aunque al ser una obra más bien antropológica o sociológica, a veces se hace un poco densa. Pero me ha parecido muy interesante.

Mat says

This book tells how hacker collective Anonymous turned from arseholes to activists. It could have done with a good edit. There are plenty of mundane chat logs that could have been halved and there is a typo on almost every page, which is often confusing. When the author spells people's names three different ways readers may be left wondering whether any of the book is accurate. At one point she refers to another book she had to finish as if it was a chore, which may also make readers wonder if she would say the same of writing this book, considering the apparent lack of care that has gone into it. The author makes much of her anthropological qualifications in analyzing Anonymous. Her occasional insights from this angle are the book's highlights, but they are too few and far between. Nevertheless, Julian Assange has called it the best book written on Anonymous - and it is certainly more in depth than the only other one I've read - by Ars Technica.

Hannah says

3.5/5

This was incredibly informative. And was honestly waaay more academic than I anticipated. I don't remember how I heard about this book, but I don't think I knew how academic it was. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for an academic read once in a while (nerd alert), but I'd rather know that going in.

Besides that, this book was fascinating! I obviously know what Anonymous is and found this in-depth look at the community interesting. Coleman describes the power relations within the group, the sense of community, and the justification for doing what they do. And while I don't necessarily agree with some of the operations Anonymous tackles, I really enjoyed reading about the thought and action that goes into it.

Overall it's a good, but heavy, read and I'd recommend it if you're interested in learning more!

Jo says

This book was so frustrating because at its center is a really interesting story about Anonymous. The sections that laid out the history of the movement, and just spoke to the development and how it worked, were quite good, but they were surrounded by a lot of junk.

Coleman's anthropological frame does not fit neatly over this material, her long digressions on Loki, Nietzsche, gods of Chaos, the crossroads, Dionysus and Apollo, added nothing to the story. Here is a sample of some of the framing she uses:

"It is rare for something actually resembling the trickster myth to come into being in the midst of our contemporary reality, much less with such panache and public presence. These hackers, in their sacrifice (and the sacrifice of others) serve to remind many of the necessity, pleasure and danger of subversion." This is both vague and hyperbolic, and the inclusion of the trickster myth adds nothing to the narrative she is building.

Her own personal experiences could have been interesting if better handled, how she got access to Anonymous etc. but as it was distracted from the main narrative. She was too eager to explain how she was also fooled by Sabu, who was acting as an FBI informant for much of the story. Here is an example of her inserting herself reacting to some shocking news: "I thought to myself, holy sweet birth of the baby Jesus, this is really happening!"

By her own admission Coleman needed to publish another book for academic reasons, and the result is poorly thrown together, wildly divergent in tone, not well edited for content, and does a poor job of sharing the wealth of knowledge she has with an audience.

Dmytro Shteflyuk says

First of all, my rating of 4 stars means 3.5. I've got what I came here for – the history, culture, motivations behind Anonymous. If you, like me, crossed paths with (been DDoSed or hacked, read an article or a public statement), but never grasped what lies behind it, this book is a great source of understanding.

The bad part is the style of the book. It is not a book about Anonymous and their culture, instead, it is a book about the journey of the author into the world of notorious hackers and prankers, mixed with her feelings, fears, and self-promotion. There are philosophical and science-paper-like bits, over-complicated and to my view meaningless, but you get used to this narrative (or can skip these chunks completely).

Overall a good read.

Barry says

I wish I could give this a 5. It has the rigour of an academic text, but is reasonably accessible. Unfortunately a crude attempt to provide for that accessibility was the hackneyed post-Neuromancer injection of pre-Christian gods and folklore as analogies. Loki. Ugh.

It's disappointing that, where it's evidenced, Coleman's seeming technical savvy is provided, according to the acknowledgements, by her husband, who runs an ISP. Perhaps he didn't spot when she mixed up 'afk' and 'irl', nor her confusion over mail server vulnerabilities versus SQL injection exploits. One can hardly blame her for the latter, being an anthropologist, but the former puts into question just how many tens of hours she really spent actively engaging the horde on IRC.

Another flaw was that, having castigated other researchers and journalists for misunderstanding Anonymous by trying to locate and profile 'spokespeople' and leaders and skewing the story, she then fell into the same trap more than once. Of course she was generally more even-handed, and really did seem to try to avoid this, but the trap is there and it caught another victim.

What I really hoped, at least, was that once and for all there would be provided - with or without Loki - a thorough origin story for Anonymous. While some readers will be glad to see the EFG-related origin of the mask (almost) recounted, meanwhile she doesn't quite tie together the threads of SomethingAwful/goons/namefags/Anonymous - to her credit they're all mentioned but she just came in too late (transitioning from general Internet versus Scientology study). Someday someone who was actually there (from the start) will write this.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

The blurb for this book says it's beautifully written. Yep..I'm calling bullshit.

I have been fascinated by the culture that is Anonymous for some time now. I was so excited to get this book. Then I started reading it. I have gone to sleep twice while reading it. That's enough. I give up.

Anonymous. You rule. This book does not.

I received an ARC copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Chad Kohalyk says

This is undoubtedly the most important book about Anonymous to date. It contains much more information on ops I had never heard of, which is expected considering much of the reporting is from the inside. If you want to know more about the Anonymous phenomenon, then read this book.

So why only 3-stars? Execution really. Parmy Olson's book is much more niche, and has some questionable

bits. But it is very well written — gripping, even. HHWS book is so uneven, schizophrenic even, bouncing back between the academic (which I appreciated) and the awkwardly jokey. I prefer her first book, Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking, and I wish she wrote this one much more "straight", instead of trying so hard to be funny.

I would give it 3.5 if Goodreads would let me. Maybe it deserves 4 due to its importance? As you can tell, I am conflicted because I respect her and what she has done. I wish she could have executed on this better.

Daniël says

Very interesting to read about the inner workings of Anonymous and how they tackled a few of their most well-known actions.

It's a shame the book is quite dry and hard to follow. It gets better past the halfway mark but I wish it would have been written in a more accessible and enjoyable way.

Raquel Pimentel says

«As Muitas Faces dos Anonymous», da mesma autora, aparece nas prateleiras em 2016. Gabriella Goleman fala-nos de uma organização cujos protagonistas são muitas vezes pessoas complexas e politicamente sofisticadas. Este livro (As Muitas Faces dos Anonymous), editado pelo Relógio d'Água, examina também os principais episódios da história dos Anonymous, analisa aspetos pouco conhecidos da cultura da Internet e relata o destino (...), muitas vezes complicado, dos elementos mais relevantes do movimento. Saber não ocupa lugar.

Amanda says

One of my favorite anthropological books of all time. Coleman's analysis of Anonymous and its growth over the past seven years is both informative and entertaining. I couldn't put Hacker Hoaxer down!

Scott von Berg says

Adequate. Meanders a lot, and isn't what I'd call succinct. I don't think I'd recommend it to others, where a Wikipedia article would likely suffice for facts, and the between the lines elements could be happily left behind.

Save yourself some time - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anonymous...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anonymous)

I'd love to see a better-written book about the group.

Erhardt Graeff says

May all academics aspire to write such a book as Biella has here. Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy is a remarkably accessible work of ethnography on a technically and ethically seeming inaccessible community and subject matter: Anonymous and its politics. Biella's account is absolutely gripping—I struggled to put this book down. Moreover, I was enchanted (as intentioned) by the story she weaves using the backdrop of humanity's mythological reflexions—the parallel and polarizing Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies of Anonymous as objective, transparent truth advocates as well as hackers for lulzy pleasure, embodying the trickster spirits of gods like Loki or Enki. Biella successfully justifies her role as ethnographer-enchantress to pull us from our cynical doubts about these so-called criminals into the heady excitement of Anonymous's world, where we might better appreciate the reasons why they did what they did and the profoundly unique mark on recent history they have made.

Perhaps, I am biased as a fan and student of creative forms of technology-augmented political action and a friend of Biella. Perhaps, this explains why I found the Acknowledgments and Note on Sources sections as absorbing as the main text. But I think it's more than my personal feelings and connections. I think it's also the effect of an exceptional piece of scholarship and storytelling.

Biella packs more than five years of participant observation, interviews, and study into a tight argument for why we cannot dismiss Anonymous as mere criminals. We get firsthand accounts of the political rationales of key Anons and watch their savvy use of media and mobilization tactics activate and embolden geeks into activists, and capture the attention and imagination of the world. Biella provides evidence of the positive impact their hacking of computer systems and the media cycle has had supporting ex-Scientology victims, Arab Spring protesters, and Occupy Wall Street activists. Furthermore, she illustrates how they have helped establish an important contemporary tradition of whistleblowing around civil rights violations and corruption in public and private sectors cresting with the Manning and ongoing Snowden leaks.

Biella also reminds us that neither are their justifications clean nor their actions obviously positive in outcome, even to her. When Anonymous chose to shine its light on certain rape cases in the US and Canada, they likely revictimized the victims in the process of pushing for justice to proceed. And the infighting of Anonymous among itself or with the historical hacker movements they nod to like anti-sec blur things further. Anonymous is far from monolithic or in consensus, and this has meant some of their operations are contradictory in their goals and ethics. Still, we find much to admire in the decentralized, anti-fame-seeking nature that persists and accomplishes much in spite of itself. Anonymous is a new kind of movement that defies simple categories.

Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy will change your mind about Anonymous, the utility of hacktivism and its ethical and moral foundations, and hopefully the unfairness in how it's been criminalized. Pick it up now.

Christopher says

Like, 3.6 stars. Great at explaining the moving parts of the technology and the evolution of a specific group of people, but I'm not sure the blow by blow infighting is so interesting other than to prove the point that this is a feature of political activism, not a bug. As an anthropologist, Coleman needs to gain their trust and speak the lingo and "get" the worldview. So there is a bit of a "one woman's journey through the darkness" tone but it is rendered a bit annoying when she describes how she ruined her vacation while staying on IRC. Definitely useful starting place to read further. Take it out of the library.

