

Anonymous' Hunt for Power Through Propaganda

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Today, most peoples' lives are integrated into the Internet, and a large portion of their free time is spent simply “surfing the web”. One of the largest drawing factors of the Internet is the wealth and variety of information that exists there. Since there is no definitive owner of the Internet, anyone is free to publish anything they want – whether it be a simple summary of their day or a pirated movie. In an attempt to control this unmonitored publication of content, the World Wide Web is under constant siege by parties seeking power over the Internet. Governments and large corporations fight for the ability to regulate content, while user-interest groups fight for online “freedom of speech”. In 2011 the United States government, looking to put an end to unregulated content on the Internet, attempted to pass the Stop Online Piracy Act. This act would give the government the power to forcefully deny access to websites containing content that they deemed to be suspicious of theft, ranging from websites hosting duplicated content to websites hosting classified documents. In one of the most well-known bouts for Internet control, Anonymous, a well known “hacktivist” group consisting of many loosely-knit computer savvy individuals, released two pieces of video propaganda in order to combat the Stop Online Piracy Act. These videos published by a group known for their belief in individual freedoms and independence from institutional control utilize images, language, and music in order to convince people to think negatively about the Stop Online Piracy Act and to rise to action against it. On the surface, this seems to be the only purpose for the propaganda; however, I argue that instead of simply convincing people against the Stop Online Piracy Act, Anonymous' video propaganda actually urges people to consider Anonymous to be the long-standing powerhouse of the Internet.

The Stop Online Piracy Act acted as a government-regulated overlay of the World Wide Web. According to the official Stop Online Piracy Act text, any website that contained

copyrighted or illegal content would be held responsible for that content and would be put onto a blacklist. Once on this blacklist, the government would force all other websites to remove any links to that website. In theory, the Stop Online Piracy Act was mainly designed to make websites that promoted the theft of United States property “disappear” and to prevent United States citizens from visiting foreign sites that infringed upon United States rules and regulations. However, in practice, some claim, this means that precious video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* would be immediately blacklisted and “removed” from the web because of users who upload copyright-infringing content. This idea angered many who frequented the Internet.

Arguably, the group that was most angered by this act was Anonymous, a group of active Internet users who felt as if the Internet was their home. In *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists* directed by Brian Knappenberger, several interviewed members of Anonymous refer to the Internet as their “home”, their “turf”, or their “territory”, and they are protective of it. This protectiveness was exemplified when the Church of Scientology repeatedly attempted to remove a video from the Internet via the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Anonymous, under the impression that the Church of Scientology was threatening “our Internet”, immediately fought back by organizing a mass re-posting of the video to many different places throughout the Internet and by launching Denial of Service Attacks against the Church of Scientology's website (We Are Legion). Knowing this, it is clear why Anonymous felt threatened by and wished to fight against the Stop Online Piracy Act.

Anonymous did not only feel that their “home” was being threatened, but also that their power over the Internet was also being threatened. The idea that they already had power over the Internet is clearly presented in their two pieces of video propaganda published in response to the Stop Online Piracy Act. In *S.O.P.A.*, the first of the two videos informing people about the details of the Act, a computer-generated voice begins a monologue with the phrase “Citizens of the

United States” (anon733). The use of this phrase to address the viewers of the video shows that Anonymous feels as if they are above the viewers, branding them as “citizens”, much like a powerful government would address its people in an official address. This separation between Anonymous and its audience, people who use the Internet, is again repeated in the monologue's closing line “To the people of the United States” (anon733). Anonymous' lack of association with the “people of the United States” shows that they do not believe themselves to be a part of them, but rather, above them and more powerful than them. Not only does Anonymous present its sense of power, but also its sense of ownership of the Internet, as in the call-to-action of *S.O.P.A.*, Anonymous urges the people of the Internet to “show the US government that we will not allow them to take away our power” (anon733). In this call-to-action, the “people of the United States” are being addressed and urged to fight against the government, and since the sentence refers to these people as “you”, Anonymous clearly establishes itself as a separate, unaffiliated party. Further, the people are being called to protect “our Internet”, implying that the Internet belongs to Anonymous.

The same assumption of power is made in *Operation Blackout*, the second of the two videos urging people to take a stand, join the fight against the Stop Online Piracy Act, and help with Operation Blackout: A plan to shutdown the Internet for a day. In this video, the same computer-generated voice delivers a different monologue to the audience. In the same way, the audience is addressed as “Citizens of the United States” (itsbatmansilly) showing that Anonymous separates itself from the common public and feels more powerful than them by calling them “citizens” just as a government would. However, since this video serves as a call-to-action, Anonymous wants the help of the people of the United States and begins addressing both themselves and the people collectively as “we” by the end of the video in order to give the audience a sense of belonging, which makes Anonymous' call-to-action more powerful.

Some argue that despite their boasts of power, Anonymous is still second to government authorities on the Internet; however, Anonymous' feelings of power and Internet control are not unjustified. Because of the fact that the Internet is widely and easily accessible by many, it acts as “an equalizer between governments and non-state actors” (Petallides). Thus, Anonymous may have just as much power as various governments, if not more, because any group is able to cause a good-amount of damage on the Internet “given a certain degree of computer savvy” (Petallides). On top of this, Anonymous has a non-hierarchical organization consisting of members who communicate with each other via an anonymous messaging board (We Are Legion). This exact structure: “small groups ... without a central command” is described as the most effective way to fight a “netwar” by David Ronfeldt, an expert in international relations. Thus, Anonymous is able to stay ahead of governments and maintain plenty of power in the Internet-space. This strength is shown every time an established group takes a course of action that Anonymous doesn't agree with, just as they did against the Australian government during a proposed Internet censorship legislation (Petallides).

Anonymous doesn't just fight against actions they don't agree with, but in the case of the Stop Online Piracy Act, they fight against the group that is threatening their control of the Internet: The United States Government. They do this to show that they are really the ones in control. In *S.O.P.A.*, the language used to describe the government makes it clear that they feel that the government as a whole is their opposition. For the duration of the video, the government is addressed through terms such as “The Government” or “The United States Government”, being scarcely substituted with pronouns. Anonymous' use of such official and formal terms shows their lack of closeness or familiarity with the government as a whole. Further, the government is also sparsely referred to as “they”, while Anonymous refers to everyone else as “the people” (anon733). Thus, Anonymous is creating a clear distinction between the two groups

and the government is cast as the outsider.

The main section of the monologue in *S.O.P.A* shows that Anonymous feels like their power over the Internet is being threatened. This is proven through the mere mentioning that “no one actually owns the Internet” and therefore the government should not be able to “block access to parts of the internet that the US government does not even own”. In order to make an argument about how the Stop Online Piracy Act is a violation of rights, there is no need to bring up the issue of Internet ownership. Since it was brought up first, however, Anonymous shows that their primary focus is retaining the unstated power and ownership that they have over the Internet. Anonymous also makes it clear that since the United States does not own the Internet, it should not be denying access to parts of it; however, there are several instances in which Anonymous has denied the public's access to parts of the Internet (We Are Legion; Petallides). The main section of the monologue concludes with an accusatory question towards the government “Who gave you the right to regulate the people's right to think outside the box and use the Internet as they see fit?” (anon733). This is another example of Anonymous is using an attempted selective-censoring of the Internet as a very negative thing, while Anonymous has hypocritically removed several things from the Internet that may have simply been too “outside the box” for their own ideals. Thus, Anonymous is simply worried that they won't be the only force regulating the Internet. Their shaming of the government for their actions while ignoring their own actions also implies that only the government's actions should be discredited, an effective strategy in modern propaganda (Minei and Matusitz). Thus, by placing themselves in a “positive light”, Anonymous attempts to convince others that they themselves should be in charge, not the government.

Anonymous asserts themselves as the rightfully powerful Internet force in *Operation Blackout* as well. Instead of speaking out against the Stop Online Piracy Act, Anonymous'

monologue targets the entirety of the United States government. They mention that this specific bill has given insight into the government's "scheming" and "plotting" against the freedom of speech on the Internet, something that Anonymous claims has been upheld by the United States for decades. This misdirection of argument changes the focus of Anonymous' arguments from the Stop Online Piracy Act to the United States Government, showing that Anonymous feels threatened by not just the act alone. The final call-to-action presented also urges people "against the powers that be", not the Stop Online Piracy Act itself. The details of the Stop Online Piracy Act threatened the power that Anonymous had over the Internet to such an extent that they wish to protest against the entire government in order to preserve and strengthen their power.

Establishing the point that they are more powerful than the United States Government, Anonymous uses its identity and reputation to gain a following of supporters. In both *S.O.P.A* and *Operation Blackout* the background of the video consists of a statically displayed Anonymous logo. The constant display of the Anonymous logo, an individual dressed in formal business attire with a question mark instead of a face, provides a sense of anonymity to the video. Instead of associating the video with an individual face, viewers now associate the video with the group as a whole. Not only does this provide background, as most viewers know who Anonymous is, but it also provides for a strong brand recognition effect, where the argument and call to action are made stronger because of Anonymous' reputation of effectively and consistently fighting for freedom of speech on the Internet. A simple link between an argument and a well-known group can make even the simplest of arguments stronger (Anholt), and that is exactly what Anonymous is doing by linking its arguments to its reputation.

In the case of *Operation Blackout*, Anonymous uses its variations of logos to make themselves even more appealing to the audience. Not only is a single Anonymous logo plastered permanently and statically onto the background of the video, but two other variations are also

displayed, each also featuring a business formal individual with a question mark in place of a face. Along with a reinforcing of the fact that the video is to be associated with Anonymous instead of an individual identity, using Anonymous' reputation to more strongly appeal to viewers (Anholt), it also shows variation in Anonymous. With the multiple logos being displayed, the viewer gets a sense that Anonymous has had a long history, where different logos have represented the group during different time periods. This boosts the credibility of Anonymous as a whole since people are more likely to trust the arguments of groups that are well-established and have had experience and a solid reputation in their fields (Anholt).

Anonymous also uses its computer-generated voice to reinforce their separation from individuality and unification as a group, making them more appealing to the audience. Through the use of a computer-generated voice to deliver the messages present in both *S.O.P.A* and *Operation Blackout*, Anonymous gives their messages an impersonal touch – something that shows that the message is being delivered by the group as a whole rather than a specific individual. Usually, adding a personal touch to propaganda makes it more appealing to the viewer, giving them a connection to the propaganda as a whole. However, in the case of Anonymous, most members are computer-savvy individuals ranging from ages sixteen to twenty-five (We Are Legion). Informing their audience that the message comes from this specific demographic may weaken their argument because viewers will naturally dismiss claims made by younger individuals due to a supposed lack of experience. On top of this, individuals belonging to this demographic are often teased and ridiculed for being “nerds” or “geeks”, and knowing that propaganda was created by these ridiculed individuals would ultimately weaken the strength of the propaganda. Thus, having a computer-generated voice to deliver Anonymous' argument serves as a method to further strengthen their propaganda and convince their audience to join them in their fight against the government.

The anonymity of the propaganda also gives Anonymous a power advantage. The videos are presented from a completely anonymous standpoint, with an unnamed creator, speaker, and even publisher (anon733; Itsbatmansilly). These videos are then viewed by people who have no anonymous identity and are watching the videos through their own personal lens. Thus, since the viewers of the video are personally unaware of whose video they are watching, they may feel intimidated and thus have even more respect for Anonymous (Warhol-Down). The power advantage does not only exist between the group and the audience, however. Since each individual member of Anonymous is unknown to the others, internal disputes and struggles are rare. On top of this, each member has the same amount of power and has no other traits besides their dedication to the cause of Anonymous. This group-focused mentality allows Anonymous to be more powerful than other groups whose members may be individually identified, causing easy internal struggle. Similar to the case of Alcoholics Anonymous, the anonymity of individual members also increases the appeal of Anonymous to the audience of the propaganda. Since they know that their own personalities will not be judged or changed, as they will not be personally known by any other members of Anonymous, they are more willing to join (Warhol-Down). This increase in interest for joining Anonymous also increases the power that Anonymous has over the populous of the Internet.

In order to make themselves even more appealing to the public, Anonymous utilizes background music in conjunction with the monologue in both *S.O.P.A* and *Operation Blackout*. Both videos choose background music that is both recognizable and popular that begins with a slow, repetitive melody and rises into loud, inspiring music by the end of the video. The rising intensity of the music suits both videos perfectly by creating more intense music for the more powerful parts of Anonymous' arguments, allowing the viewers to become inspired by the combination of inspirational music and the words of Anonymous' monologue. This inspiration

will be instilled into those who are knowingly looking to be convinced by Anonymous' arguments. On top of this, the use of popular music also helps Anonymous' argument appeal to those who are not looking for convincing (Gorn). Through the use of popular background music, both those that are seeking convincing and those who just want an overview of the Stop Online Piracy Act are convinced that the United States Government is attempting to take control of an uncontrollable Internet and denying the people of their basic rights, and following Anonymous will stop the government from doing this.

Ultimately, the video propaganda was effective. The true influential power that these videos had can be seen when analyzing the effects of Operation Blackout as a whole. Although Anonymous did not follow through with their initial plan of making the entire Internet inaccessible to the general public for a day, the operation still showed results. Not only was their video propaganda seen by millions of users worldwide, essentially convincing them against the government's course of action, but their operation also inspired popular websites like Google, Wikipedia, and Mozilla to display anti-SOPA banners on their web page (Wortham). The websites, being viewed by millions daily, helped convince the general public that the Stop Online Piracy Act was not for them.

Not all of Anonymous' strength is used for good that everyone can agree upon, however. Although most of Anonymous' courses of action have been against groups who were clearly doing wrong, several well-known members of Anonymous have expressed that one of the things they love most about what they do is the pleasure that they gain from upsetting others (We Are Legion). Currently, Anonymous spreads its messages via videos, text, and denial of service attacks – all valid forms of cyber-propaganda (Minei and Matusitz); however, as Elizabeth Minei and Jonathan Matusitz, experts in modern communications explain, as Internet groups feel the need for more and more power, they use the media to “manipulate and form desired images in

the minds of the public”, and catastrophic viruses are a perfect way to do this (Minei and Matusitz). Thus, with Anonymous in control, the Internet could become a much more unpleasant place, as it could be rampant with propaganda and viruses that spread the ideas of Anonymous simply so they could have a few laughs and feel in-charge. But this is the extreme case. It is entirely possible for Anonymous to use any power it gains for the betterment of the Internet as a whole.

The proposal of the Stop Online Piracy Act made everyone on the Internet question who was in charge. Anonymous, feeling as if they had the most control, released two pieces of video propaganda that challenged the Stop Online Piracy Act. An analysis of the monologues of both videos revealed that Anonymous did indeed feel in charge and may have simply been using the event as a reason to convince others that Anonymous was the true powerhouse of the Internet. Combining the monologue with several other elements such as the anonymity and permanence of a computer-generated voice and their logos showed that Anonymous was working as a group, rather than as an individual, and when combined with their choice of popular music, their propaganda became very appealing to both their intended and unintended audiences. Although the propaganda may not have been as affective as Anonymous would have liked, the millions of people who watched their videos are surely more attracted to and respectful of Anonymous than they ever were before, granting Anonymous their desired power. With this power, the future of the Internet may be in the hands of Anonymous, and they may do whatever they may please.

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