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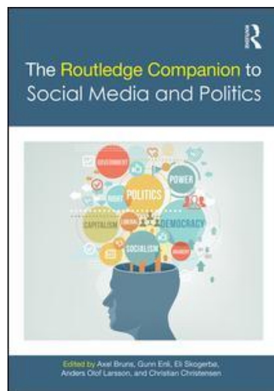

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Part II

POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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10
ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

Anonymous and the Steubenville/ Maryville Rape Cases

Christian Christensen

Introduction

The phrase 'all politics is local' is attributed to the former United States Speaker of the House of Representatives, Democrat Tip O'Neill. What O'Neill was attempting to convey was that while the popular understanding of politics is one in which politicians deal with large-scale, grand ideas, what voters *actually* care about is what happens to them at the everyday, local level. In other words, if politicians want to appeal to their base, and thus get votes and remain in office, they must both understand these local concerns, and act on them. In addition to contextualising politics, the phrase is also a reminder to researchers that while large-scale national and global political events (such as wars or elections) are important and worthy of attention, we should not forget how events at the lesser-covered regional or local levels usually encapsulate fundamental social and political issues. In turn, how these regional and/or local events are, for example, covered in the news media or impacted by social media use is also becomes extremely important.

An excellent example of the local as a microcosm of the global was the 2014 shooting death of the African American teenager Michael Brown by the white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, and the importance of social media (particularly Twitter) in raising national awareness in the U.S. about the case. The shooting death was a 'local' event, yet after a relative paucity of national coverage, intense social media activity by a number of dedicated activists and local citizens turned Ferguson into a large-scale story. Once the story reached national attention, what we saw was that the shooting of one teenager by police on the outskirts of St. Louis resonated with citizens throughout the U.S., precisely because it involved the widely recognised themes of racism, police violence, local governance, judicial impartiality, and media underperformance. In other words, it was about politics writ large. Clearly, for a local story to gain traction on social media, it must involve themes or tropes that 'click' with users beyond a small geographical zone, and the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson was just such a case.

Taking the case of Ferguson—and the relationship between the local, social media and the national—as a conceptual point of departure, I would like to use other 'local'

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cases from the U.S. as a springboard for discussing the relationship between social media and politics using the involvement of the online 'hacktivist' group Anonymous in two particular events: rapes that took place in the small towns of Steubenville, Ohio, in 2012, and Maryville, Missouri, in 2013. Of course, it is important to note that this chapter deals with two specific Anonymous actions that took place in the U.S. Thus, the discussion and analysis presented here should be understood as being within the context of U.S. media and politics (although the implications outside of the U.S. will be addressed in the concluding section). With this caveat in mind, I would like to consider how scholars have conceived of Anonymous as a political entity and also to address how localised activist engagements in the U.S. on issues as specific as individual rape cases spill over into activism and information about local politics and power that has relevance well beyond the city limits of the small towns at the centre of the events. Rather than a detailed empirical analysis, this chapter is intended as a springboard for considering the actions of Anonymous in these cases within the context of social media and (local) politics.

Before delving into the specifics of the two cases, I would like to begin with a brief description of Anonymous, followed by an outline of some of relevant writing on the politics and political actions of the loosely coordinated group.

Anonymous

Anonymous is a group that many have heard of, but few can actually define or explain. An exception to this is anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), who has been seminal in providing researchers with a clearer understanding of the group and its origins. Anonymous, according to Coleman, is usually misunderstood:

> Relying on a fairly predictable script, most commentators—including journalists and academics alike—usually introduce Anonymous as an evasive and shadowy group of hackers. This description distorts sociological reality. Although Anonymous is certainly a home to hackers, a great many Anons are neither hackers nor difficult to find. (Coleman 2013a: 12)

There are no technical barriers to participation in Anonymous, and while it is best known as a 'hacking' collective, Coleman is quick to note that the majority of 'Anons' are, in fact, not hackers but rather 'geeks' who possess a variety of skills. Importantly, "no single group or individual can dictate the use of the name or iconography of Anonymous, much less claim legal ownership of its names, icons and actions" (Coleman 2013a: 12), and while Anonymous actions often appear to be random, they are usually instigated in response to specific events. In terms of actions, the group has a variety of tools at its disposal:

> Anonymous tactics range from simple DDoS and botnet attacks["Distributed Denial of Service" attacks where systems are overloaded and shut down], website defacement, and social engineering (tricking people into revealing security details), through to sophisticated hacking, locating, and exploiting security vulnerabilities and breaching large organizations' information technology

> networks. Tactics are commonly mixed within particular "Ops." DDoS attacks work on scale: large numbers of people (requiring few technical skills) use simple software to overwhelm a site with traffic. (Goode 2015: 77)

The 'birth' of Anonymous is usually traced back to a website called 4chan (created in 2003) and a specific section of 4chan known as the '/b/board'. As Norton (2011: paras. 33–34) notes:

> At some moment lost in its unrecorded history, /b/ and Anonymous reached an inflection point, and the id spilled into the rest of the net in the form of "ultra-coordinated motherfuckery," as one anon described it to Coleman. This was the ability to use the technological tools of social coordination so quickly and well that anons working together could collectively attack targets for any perceived slight, or just for fun, without those targets ever having a chance to see it coming or defend themselves. These came to be called "raids."

These early years, from 2003 until around 2008, were marked be a heavy dose of 'trolling' on 4chan, which Coleman (2011: para. 5) described as a combination of, for example, "telephone pranking, having many unpaid pizzas sent to the target's home, DDoSing, and most especially, splattering personal information, preferably humiliating, all over the Internet". According to Coleman (2011), a shift came in 2008 when Anonymous began a trolling campaign against the Church of Scientology, which was followed by a split within the group between those more interested in trolling for entertainment and those who wished to pursue more clearly defined political goals.

A great deal of the Anonymous focus upon Scientology remained until 2010, at which point the group began to diversify. In 2010, Anonymous ran 'Operation Payback', which began by targeting the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) but evolved to also target the websites of companies such as PayPal, MasterCard and Amazon: organisations that had withdrawn their services to WikiLeaks following their release of a number of U.S. diplomatic cables and what was understood to be U.S. state pressure. In 2011, Anonymous ran 'OpTunisia', supporting anti-government protesters in that country by, for example, providing 'care packets' containing information of how to avoid government surveillance, as well as helping to distribute videos demonstrating state violence. As Coleman (2011: para. 15) wrote, while previous actions usually focused on Internet-based issues (such as censorship), the OpTunisia operation, "moved squarely into human rights activism as it converged with an existing social movement (para. 16". The movement toward more 'traditional' activism continued after Tunisia, as Anonymous "also led attacks in Italy as Silvio Berlusconi faced accusations of sleeping with an underage prostitute, and in Wisconsin to protest a law that seeks to shred collective bargaining rights of public unions" (Coleman 2011: para. 16).

The 'Politics' of Anonymous

The post-2008 shift of certain members of Anonymous toward more overt political action should lead us to consider the relationship between them and what we might

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define as mainstream politics—in addition to considering their role as activists, hacktivists, vigilantes, and bandits. For Woods (2014), Anonymous is an important subject for analysis as it demonstrates, "that the Internet is not just a tool for communication, it is increasingly a location of conflict, contestation, and community formation" (Woods 2014: 345). While few would argue with the contention that the group is provocative, exactly *how* we should consider or define Anonymous (structurally and politically) is a more open question. Wong and Brown (2013: 1015) offer a good starting point when they ask of groups such as Anonymous and WikiLeaks:

> Are they freedom-of-speech fighters or tech-savvy terrorists? Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, or a new international criminal? We argue that WikiLeaks, Anonymous, and other groups engaged in what has become described as hacktivism are "extraordinary bandits" (e-bandits), adapting Hobsbawm's iconic "social bandit" for the challenges of politics in the digital age.

Wong and Brown (2013: 1021) contend that groups such as Anonymous are contemporary versions of the feudal bandits who have "occupied the space between lords, states, and the peasantry throughout history by challenging the status quo". Examples of such bandits include 'noble robbers', individuals who (1) rectify injustice by taking from the rich and giving to the poor, (2) feel they are in the right as they are seeking a rebalance of justice though honourable tactics, and (3) emerge from (and have the support of) a clearly-defined community (Wong and Brown 2013: 1021). This Robin Hood-esque image is one echoed in the recent work of Coleman (2013a, 2014), who coined the term 'weapons of the geek' to describe the actions of Anons, in deliberate contrast to the term 'weapons of the weak' created by James Scott (1985) to describe "the unique, clandestine nature of peasant politics" (Coleman 2013a: 14). For Coleman, while peasant dissent was marked by the actions of "disenfranchised, economically marginalized populations" engaging in "small-scale illicit acts," the actions of groups such as Anonymous, "is a modality of politics exercised by a class of privileged and visible actors who often lie at the centre of economic life" (Coleman, 2013a: 14).

So, can we then speak of an Anonymous 'politics'? Given the nebulous nature of the group, it would appear to be difficult. Goode (2015) defines the Anonymous roots as 'prepolitical' and as a sub-culture dedicated primarily to amusement and fun (Goode makes sure to note, however, that this was *prepolitical* rather than *apolitical*). As noted, after the period between 2003 and 2008, the group took a more serious turn, with actions targeting larger corporate and state actors. In particular, the support given by Anonymous to WikiLeaks in 2010 was a clue as to the political/ideological leanings of the group:

> Since Anonymous actively supports Wikileaks [*sic*], one can presume that their ideologies overlap. Anonymous' ideology must include some form of the radical transparency for institutions paired with strong privacy for individuals that is at the core of Wikileaks' ideology. The radical transparency advocated by Wikileaks is conceptually not far from the mantra of the hacker ethic: 'Information wants to be Free'. (Serracino-Inglott 2013: 224)

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This alliance with WikiLeaks has led many to assume that Anonymous are 'cyberlibertarians': a term that "reflects the prevailing philosophy of the hackers and technology entrepreneurs responsible for developing the internet and for defending it from government regulation" (Goode 2015: 77). For cyberlibertarians, their faith in technology is matched by their mistrust of state power and regulation. In addition—and linking them to conventional libertarians—there is also a belief in the importance and utility of the free market. For Goode, however, this is a simplistic understanding of the group that "could lead to a view that Anonymous has little to contribute and may even be anathema to a progressive politics founded on positive as well as negative freedoms" (Goode 2015: 83). Goode accepts that libertarian values may be the "most pronounced" within Anonymous, but notes that "the contradictory nature of the Anonymous ethos also signals space for a progressive political agenda" (Goode 2015: 84).

The deep mistrust of the state suggested by the cyberlibertarian label, in addition to the chaotic, lawless imagery evoked by notions such as 'bandits' or 'vigilantes', combines to suggest an organisation committed to working outside of the boundaries of the state. On this issue Serracino-Inglott (2013: 222) admits that "Anons are general antagonistic to states" and that the organisation "is not willingly accountable to any state". In addition, Anons are more than willing to break laws they consider to be barriers to the service of justice. However, "as Anonymous becomes more clearly political it is condemning the existing apparatus of state as defective much more explicitly" (Serracino-Inglott (2013: 222), and, in this condemnation, while making their displeasure at the failure of the state clear, Anons do not demand 'street justice' but rather 'effective state-served justice'. Thus, "not all Anons are opposed to the idea of the state *per se*. So, one must not fall into the temptation of declaring the state passe, an irrelevant concept to be overcome in the information age" (Serracino-Inglott (2013: 222). Thus, when considering actions such as those taken on/in Steubenville and Maryville, it is worth remembering that this is an organisation advocating the use of formalised political structures to rectify what it considers to be injustice. In this way, and perhaps at odds with popular perceptions of the group, there are "significant indications that the ideological frameworks of Anonymous and the citizens of liberal democracies are on converging paths of evolution" (Serracino-Inglott 2013: 238). In order to place some flesh on these conceptual bones, I would now like to discuss the two cases, and the Anonymous involvement.

The Steubenville Rape Case

On the night of 11 August 2012, in the town of Steubenville, Ohio, a 16-year-old high school girl was sexually assaulted by members of the local high school football team. The girl, who had attended a series of parties and had been drinking heavily, was incapacitated and/or unconscious at the time of the assaults. The accused (and a number of witnesses) took pictures and videos on their mobile phones before, during, and after the assaults, and these images were spread via text message, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. The most damning evidence was a 12-minute video posted to YouTube showing another student (not one of the convicted rapists) discussing the girl and what had been done to her. In March of 2013, two students (who were aged 16 at the time of

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the crime) were convicted of the rape of a minor, while three other students were found guilty of obstructing the rape investigation.

This simple synopsis of the case hides a much more complicated and political story. First, while the crime was in no way unusual, the capture of video and still images by those convicted, and their spread via social media, marked (at least in popular terms) a new phase in the collection of evidence. Thus, in the Steubenville case, technology and social media played a central role. As reported in the *New York Times* in late 2012 (Macur & Schweber 2012: para. 10):

> It is a sexual assault accusation in the age of social media, when teenagers are capturing much of their lives on their camera phones—even repugnant, possibly criminal behavior, as they did in Steubenville in August—and then posting it on the Web, like a graphic, public diary.

The second significant aspect is the role that politics played in the way in which the case was handled by local authorities. Interestingly, even though the story was covered in September of 2012 by the Cleveland Plain Dealer (Dissell 2012), it was not until the *New York Times* article, cited above, that a sea-change took place in how the case was handled in Steubenville: a change that would have a profound impact upon local politics. The change was not due to simple mainstream media attention but to the involvement of Anonymous.

In the aftermath of the *New York Times* article, on 24 December 2012, an offshoot of Anonymous, known as KnightSec, hacked the website of the Steubenville high school football team (www.rollredroll.com) and posted a video in which a masked Anon (with a signature, digitally simulated voice) issued a warning that unless all involved in the rape came out with a public apology by 1 January 2013, the group would release personal information on members of the football team, the coaching staff, and their families (including addresses and Social Security Numbers). This was the start of what came to be called *#OpRollRedRoll* (named after the nickname of the Steubenville football team). When no confessions or apologies emerged, KnightSec followed through with their threat, releasing an incriminating video showing Steubenville students who dubbed themselves the 'rape crew' discussing the assault. In addition to the video and the release of names and personal information, Anonymous (via social media) promoted a series of 'Occupy Steubenville' protests in late 2012 and early 2013 (Abad-Santos 2013a, 2013b). Attendance at these protests was lower than hoped, but they garnered media attention, and the embattled Sherriff of Steubenville attended a 5 January 2013 protest and fielded a small number of questions from attendees (Simpson 2013).

The Maryville Rape Case

In 2013 a strikingly similar case to the one in Steubenville took place in the small town of Maryville, Missouri. In January of 2012, a 14-year-old girl left her house at 1 a.m. (together with a 13-year-old friend) to meet with a 17-year-old Maryville high school student with whom she had been texting. The girls had been drinking, and they continued to drink after they met up with the older boys. After passing out from the alcohol, the victim was driven home in the early hours of the morning, where her mother would find her, three hours later, scratching at the front door in sub-freezing temperatures, wearing nothing but a T-shirt and sweatpants. The victim had no memory of what

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had happened, and her mother immediately contacted the police. Upon testing, it was shown that, seven hours after she had stopped drinking, the girl still had a blood-alcohol level of 0.13 (Bazelon 2013; Elgion 2013).

While there were striking overlaps with the Steubenville case, one key difference was that the accused 17-year-old never denied having had sex with the victim, nor did he deny that he left her outside of her house in sub-freezing temperatures. The accused claimed that while the victim had been drinking, and that he had supplied alcohol, she was coherent at the time had given consent for sex to take place. The accused was immediately arrested and charged with sexual assault and endangerment of a child. Despite the evidence, and the confession of the accused, two weeks later the charges were dropped. A virulent online hate campaign started against the victim and her family who were subsequently forced to leave Maryville. Six months later, in April of 2013, the victim's house was burnt to the ground in what were described as 'suspicious' circumstances.

It was at this point that Anonymous took up the story. After the *Kansas City Star* ran a piece in October of 2013 questioning the handling of the case (Arnett 2013), Anonymous members released the following statement on #OpMaryville:

Greetings, World

We are #OpMaryville

> Two young girls have been raped in the town of Maryville, Missouri. Another high school football star, the grandson of a Missouri state official, has walked free. The people of Maryville turned their backs on these victims and one family has been forced to flee the town. Their house was later burned to the ground.
>
> (. . .)
>
> We demand an immediate investigation into the handling by local authorities of Daisy's case. Why was a suspect, who confessed to a crime, released with no charges? How was video and medical evidence not enough to put one of these football players inside a court room? What is the connection of these prosecutors, if any, to Rep. Rex Barnett? Most of all, We are wondering, how do the residents of Maryville sleep at night? (Anonymous: http://pastebin.com/3rq0ZSrY)
>
> The tactic employed by Anonymous was a 'Twitterstorm' scheduled to start at precisely 5 p.m. on October 15, 2013:

#OpMaryville Twitterstorm Package!

OBJECTIVE:

> Raise Awareness in social media, put pressure on Attorney General Chris Koster to launch an investigation into the lack of charges against Matthew Barnett (despite a confession and evidence of his guilt), and promote that on Tuesday, October 22, 2013, at 10:00am we will meet at the Nodaway County Courthouse in Maryville, Missouri with daisies in our hands for a peaceful protest in support of Daisy Coleman.

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Date & Time: Tuesday, October 15, 2013, 5PM EST / 2PM PST

INSTRUCTIONS:

> Copy + Paste these tweets. Do not retweet, the hashtag will not trend.
> If you are writing your own tweets, make sure to include the #opMaryville hashtag!
> You do not need to post more than once every five minutes, especially to avoid suspension of your account. (Anonymous: http://pastebin.com/G0ahgG6Q)

While impossible to gauge the specific impact that the involvement of Anonymous had upon the police and the judicial system in Maryville, the case was almost immediately re-opened. After further investigation, no rape charges were filed, and in January of 2014 (two years after the event), the accused pled guilty to a single count of child endangerment (a misdemeanour charge) and was sentenced to two years' probation and a suspended four-month jail term (Dockterman 2014).

The response of the part of Anonymous to reports of two sexual assaults quickly evolved into interesting case studies on the interaction between social media, activism, and politics. As noted in multiple newspaper stories on the Steubenville and Maryville cases, social media played a central role in both cases, not only because these platforms were used by Anonymous, but also because a great deal of the evidence surrounding both assaults was captured on cell phones and distributed via social media. The presence of this material on social media, in turn, supplied Anonymous with the opportunity to attempt to obtain these images, videos and texts (through targeted hacks) and then use those same platforms to expose those they considered to be guilty (or guilty of the obstruction of justice).

This social media activism also linked both sexual assaults to local politics. In the case of Steubenville, there were widespread accusations that the two high school football players were given preferential treatment, and the case downplayed, as a result of a close relationship between local law enforcement, politicians, legal structures, and the football team. In the case of Maryville, the political connections were even closer, as one of the accused was the grandson of a former four-term member of the Missouri House of Representatives (and 32-year member of the Missouri Highway patrol), and there were concrete accusations that strings had been pulled in order to have the initial charges dropped (Arnett 2013).

The rapid increase in the visibility of the two cases following the involvement of Anonymous, the release of the names and personal information of several local students and calls to action including the Maryville 'Twitterstorm' and the three 'Occupy Steubenville' protests (also coordinated online and via social media) also focused a considerable degree of attention upon the (supposedly) politically incestuous nature of small-town politics. Yet, media coverage of the case, while extensive, was far from uniform in support of what Anonymous (and the blogger Alexandria Goddard) had done, including their use of social media for activism. In a number of high-profile articles in the *New Yorker, The Guardian, Washington Post* and *Jezebel*, the 'vigilantism' of Anonymous, while generally accepted to have been in good faith, not only misrepresented the towns of Steubenville and Maryville (and overstated the level of political nepotism) but also inflicted personal damage by 'outing' individuals who were not involved in the attacks, as well as (in the case of Steubenville) spreading potentially traumatic images of the victim across social media (Levy 2013; Filipovic 2013; Baker 2013; Reese 2013).

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Discussion

In discussing the role of social media in contemporary politics, how should we then consider groups such as Anonymous and actions such as those that took place in Ohio and Missouri? As discussed above, one of the components of both the Steubenville and Maryville cases that enabled Anonymous to gain a foothold was the fact that much of the material was digital—and, thus, potentially 'hackable.' Coleman (2013a: 15) noted the relationship between this type of environment and hacktivism:

> Since Anonymous' forte is publicity, it can create a PR nightmare for its targets. This reflects an important aspect of the contemporary media and information environment: the reputations of institutions or individuals are now more vulnerable to credible critiques and leaks, as well as false smear campaigns. Even if information is not featured on the evening news, it may still spread like wildfire if enough individuals circulate it on social media.

The notion of individual and institutional vulnerability in conjunction with the possibility of both credible and/or slanderous critique is critical. The use of social media for the purposes of information and disinformation by political activists is a matter of fact, but what separates Anonymous from other more traditional activist groups is that, via hacking, they also tap into a well of information that is hidden from the general public. Such information can be both illuminating and problematic. The release of the infamous Steubenville video showing a student discussing the alleged sexual assault was powerful (and the views on YouTube have reached the millions), yet Anonymous have also released the names, addresses, and personal details of individuals who have been shown to be innocent of any crimes. Coleman's second point—about the ability to bypass mainstream media—is also important, but it also brings us back to the issue of the potential dangers of the spread of de-contextualised, raw information.

What we saw in in both Steubenville and Maryville was how attacks upon individuals morphed into attacks on broader political institutions. Both the local police and judicial systems in the United States are highly politicised: County Sheriffs, for example, are elected, as are judges and, in some states, District Attorneys. The intertwining of social and political issues meant that Steubenville and Maryville were as much about politics as they were about sexual assault, in much the same way that Ferguson was just as much about local and state politics as it was about police violence.

As their combination of online and offline activism illustrated, conceptions of Anonymous as a 'online-only' group are misplaced. During the cases discussed in this chapter, their actions followed the definition of 'hacktivism' discussed by Li (2013: 305):

> Although "hacktivism" is a loaded term that elicits mixed responses to its legitimacy, hacktivism can be broadly defined as the "combination of grassroots political protest with computer hacking" through the "nonviolent use of illegal or legally ambiguous digital tools [to pursue] political ends."

Linking this to Serracino-Inglott's (2013) discussion on the relationship between Anonymous and the state, it is worth asking not only what type of 'political ends' Anonymous seek as a result of their actions, but also the tools used to achieve those

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ends. Looking at the Steubenville and Maryville cases, we can see varying levels of trust in the efficacy of the state on the part of Anonymous, as well as varying forms of action.

In what many (at least in popular terms) would consider to be the quintessential Anonymous *modus operandi*, we have the obtaining and leaking of personal information on individuals suspected of criminal activity (or the obstruction of justice) and threats to expose (via social media such as YouTube or Twitter) these individuals unless they confess and/or take action. These methods are closest to the form of extra-judicial vigilantism with which Anonymous is usually associated. Here, the law and politics are seen to have failed, and, thus, action is needed in order to rectify such failure, with the specialist knowledge possessed by Anons—the 'weapons of the Geek', as defined by Coleman—utilised to obtain the information required to apply pressure. This can be seen as the 'first phase' of political action.

In order to expand pressure, however, the participation of interested parties outside of the Anonymous group is required. Thus, Anonymous used 'Twitterstorms' and organised rallies in order galvanise interest surrounding the two cases. Here, we see a far more 'traditional' implementation of political action, with goals more firmly rooted in what we might consider 'conventional' politics. While hacks and the spreading of personal information in order to intimidate targets can both strain and break the borders of legality, online message sending and physical rallies in front of courthouses or police stations are far more accepted, and can have greater impact. In this 'second phase' of political action (after the specialised hacks), the goal was a resolution of the two cases via conventional legal and political avenues (trials or official censure). Thus, one could argue that Anonymous' actions in relation to Steubenville and Maryville are a contradictory combination of anti-statist libertarian vigilantism (fuelled by specialist technical knowledge) and more conventional political dissent with an aim toward state-centred resolutions.

Of course, no discussion of online (or offline) activism would be complete without a consideration of impact. As I have noted, this chapter is not an empirically based study on Anonymous and the two rape cases but rather a reflection upon what these two events should lead us to consider in relation to this type of 'hacktivism'. Nevertheless, the analysis of Woods (2014) is worth considering:

> Although virality can initially amplify a campaign's message and energize would-be supporters, visibility and interest can be difficult to maintain long-term. #OPRollRedRoll and #OccupySteubenville, for instance, gained widespread exposure in the weeks and months after Doe's sexual assault, retaining some visibility (albeit in a less intense form) in 2013 as the case went to trial (. . .) The campaign quietly resurfaced in autumn 2014 alongside news that one of the convicted men was rejoining the Steubenville football team. By this time, however, many Anons and their followers had directed their attention elsewhere. (Woods 2014: 1097)

This critique from Woods is reminiscent of a great deal of research on, and analysis of, the longer-term impact of social media use for the purposes of online activism and political change. An excessive focus on 'virality', one could argue, ignores the offline activities and participation Anonymous (and others) attempted to foster in the two towns, and the longer-term impact (upon the participants) such activism could engender. Similarly, while Anons may have indeed moved on to other issues, the fact remains

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that a great deal of public discourse on sexual assault, social norms. and the U.S. legal system had been stimulated.

Conclusions

As noted at the start of this chapter, the focus in this analysis of Anonymous has been in relation to events that have taken place in the U.S. While the U.S. media and legal systems—in addition to U.S. sociopolitical structures—clearly played a large role in shaping how both Steubenville and Maryville evolved, these two cases (in conjunction with the consideration about the 'politics' of Anonymous) raise questions relevant beyond the U.S. border. The somewhat paradoxical combination of unfettered (and occasionally misguided) releases of information with calls for injustices to be rectified via established political or legal structures is one which only has relevance if political and/or legal structures maintain some level of legitimacy. Although critical of these structures in the U.S. context, Anonymous does not dismiss them as irrelevant or utterly corrupt. This raises the question of how similar political actions by hacktivist groups would function in countries where trust in the political and legal systems had dissolved. In the U.S., Anonymous provide an interesting example of the interplay between legal (protests, calls for arrests, petitions) and extra-legal (hacking of private or classified information) activity. Future research should pay attention to how nation-specific levels of trust in policing, legal, and political systems impact the efficacy and tactics of groups engaged in similar activities beyond U.S. borders.

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