

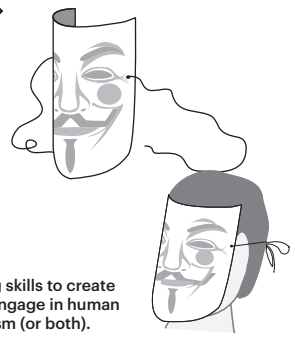


1 Cut along the dotted line.

2 Punch holes through the black dots next to the eyes. (You might want to make holes for the eyes as well.)

3 Thread a string through the holes you just made and tie the mask to your head.

4 Use insightful hacking skills to create fearsome pranks, or to engage in human rights technology activism (or both).



**IRC, WHERE MEN ARE MEN, WOMEN ARE MEN, AND 14-YEAR OLD GIRLS ARE FBI-AGENTS.**

A1: everyone trusts you, so you're doing something right  
A1: someone irl did say to me once  
A1: 'oh you're talking to that biella again'  
A1: 'shes SO a fed'

# AM I ANONYMOUS?

Learning how Anonymous works means learning to be one. **Gabriella Coleman** narrates her experience of being in between worlds.

**IT WAS DECEMBER 2010**, and my plans were simple: finish my book manuscript on the politics of free and open-source software hacking and spend time with my family on an island off the coast of Washington State. That is, until Anonymous once again reared its head. While family members went hiking during the day and watched movies late into the night, I huddled over my laptop obsessed with Anonymous: a name and a cluster of ideals taken by different individuals and groups to organize distinct and often unrelated actions, from fearsome pranks to human rights technology activism.

Although by winter of 2008, individuals deployed various political demonstrations and activities under the banner of Anonymous (prior to this, the name was used almost exclusively to stage Internet pranks), it only fully entered public consciousness in December 2010. Unfolding before my eyes was a distributed denial of service (DDoS) campaign: #operationpayback. No doubt my research appeared rather lifeless to those around me; but what I was witnessing on Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—the central nervous system of so many geek and hacker interactions— was anything but boring. Normally home to lively, albeit quotidian and mundane conversation, scores of individuals populated the chat room #operationpayback, where actions were discussed and coordinated. At one point the channel ballooned to seven thousand participants and bots. Many were contributing to the DDoS campaign aimed directly at disabling the servers of Visa, Mastercard and PayPal. Julian Assange's organization Wikileaks,

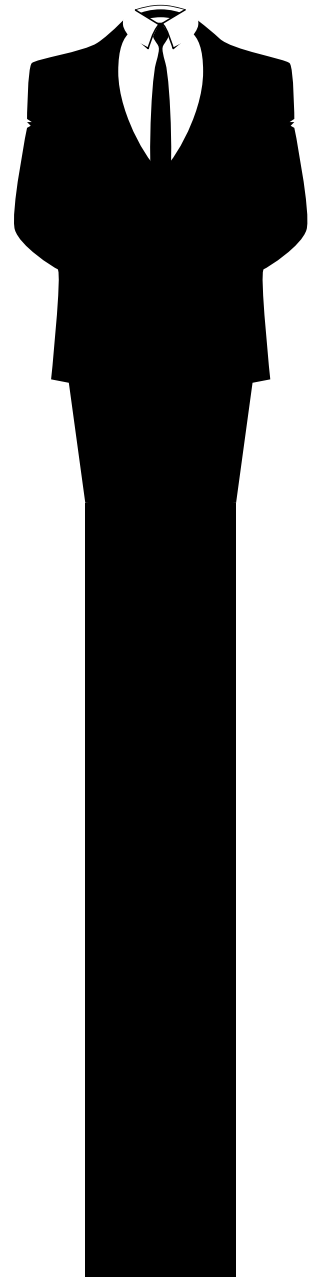
had just caused a major political firestorm by releasing 220 leaked confidential diplomatic cables, and these companies were targeted by #operationpayback for refusing to accept donations to Wikileaks.

For most of December I watched the blizzard of activity on AnonOps in silence, unsure how or when to intervene given the furiously fast pace of the conversations, spanning various topics, from the time-honored tradition of humorously taunting the FBI, to ethically dense deliberations on the DDoS as protest tactic. In early January, my silence came to end when a handful of Anons singled me out:

```
A1: Can anyone in here confirm bi-  
    ella?  
A2: i talked to her today but...  
A3: you know her A2?  
A2: if she would send me a DM on  
    twitter, i could.  
A3: "biella is away: I'm not here  
    right now" and no @'s in any of  
    7 channels...  
A2: yes, if she's the biella from  
    twitter, i talked to her before  
A1: We may need to dispose of jour-  
    nalists from here in just a bit.  
A1: (Temporarily.)  
A3: she can come back later  
YOU HAVE BEEN KICKED BY A2: (hi bi-  
    ella, could you DM me on twitter  
    please? thanks!)
```

```
[I log back in, quite nervous]
```

```
BIELLA: hello A2 A1
```



BIELLA: sorry about that i was away cooking  
 BIELLA: this is me  
 [ . . . ]  
 BIELLA: i have referred many reporters here  
 BIELLA: and am writing/presenting on Anonymous  
 [ . . . ]  
 A2: Hi biella, apologies for the kick.  
 BIELLA: no it is ok  
 BIELLA: you gave fair warning :-)  
 and i have been too too idle  
 BIELLA: more than i would like  
 A1: We're just usually very strict  
 and sometimes a little paranoid  
 of unidentified users in here.

It was a make-or-break moment. If these Anons had cast me in an unfavorable light (whether untrustworthy or a nuisance or both), it could have put an end to my research. These Anons not only seemed to be fine with my presence, some were keen to have me around. After this conversation, I chimed in more frequently, spending on average about five hours a day on IRC, roughly following six to twelve IRC channels at once, seven days a week. Following activity on AnonOps and a few other Anonymous networks has been simultaneously exhilarating and frustrating. Anonymous is clandestine and sprawling, with a constantly mutating labyrinthine architecture. In any moment there can be two to five active IRC networks, each populated by dozens of channels where Anons interact, sometimes seriously, sometimes playfully. Sometimes it is impossible to tell the two apart. Over the course of a mere fifteen minutes in a single chatroom, people might be joking about 'fapping' (aka masturbation), holding a serious discussion about the latest anti-piracy legislation under consideration in Congress, answering questions posed by a visiting reporter, launching virulent accusations against individuals, and greeting the visiting anthropologist. Take for instance, the conversation below, which reflects the multi-layered, multi-threaded, somewhat chaotic, and often quite playful character common to conversational life on IRC:

S: Three officers were also taken to hospital with serious injuries, according to police. Warsaw.  
 [reporting on clashes in Poland on Independence day]  
 ANONREPORTERX: Will anonymous ever appoint any kind of leadership or known spokes people? Why/why

not?  
 J: if there are no leaders, and the mass is not a leader either  
 J: who would have the capacity to 'appoint leaders'  
 J: ?  
 ANONREPORTERX: I am asking.  
 S: True leaders speak for everyone.  
 ANONREPORTERY: let's do it anyway. it's Neil Young's bd. that would be a great present #anonspoxNYoung  
 M: Anonymous not longer is anonymous if it has an appointed leader..  
 J: anonreporterX, I know, and I'm trying to show you how, simply using common sense and logical reasoning  
 J: you can reason that there will never and can never be a leader  
 J: without having to even ask it  
 J: :)  
 K: ^  
 mode (+v biella) by S  
 J: a wild biella appears!  
 P: Oh snap  
 \*\*\*x catches the wild biella  
 X: :p  
 BIELLA: :-)))  
 J: lol  
 BIELLA: a sleepy biella /me just wakin' up  
 BIELLA: glad to see this here [since a reporter channel had been down for awhile]  
 J: good morning then :P  
 [ . . . ]  
 M: Aloha!  
 X: lol  
 P: lol  
 X: aloha!  
 ANONREPORTERX: that seems unrealistic:  
 1. Anonymous is already having to deal with defining who does and does not represent the movements' intentions (blac bloc in Oakland) and...  
 X: no  
 J: anonreporterX, where is it defined who does or does not represent Anonymous?  
 J: last time I checked, anyone trying to do so was talking out of his ass :P

As the conversation was unfolding, and prompted by AnonreporterX's trite question about leadership, I told one Anon that I would like to write an anthropological piece on journalist's obsession with leaders. During this private conversation, he followed with a question and comment of his own:

A8: about what?  
 BIELLA: how the medias desire to find a leader says more about a reporters relationship to their editor and certain

obsessions within American culture  
**BIELLA:** than anything else  
**A8:** thats true  
**A8:** I have yet to see a european other  
 media obsess over leadership like us  
 does  
**BIELLA:** EXACTLY  
**A8:** though uk tends to sensationalize it  
 too

As might be obvious, much of my time with Anonymous is spent chatting on public channels, in back channels, and with single Anons and often without much aim; while I ask Anons targeted questions, I also go with the flow, doing as everyone else around seems to be doing.

The aimlessness is important, however, for it captures one of two important types of labor and interactivity valued by Anons. One is a form of charismatic sociality quite common on IRC where cleverness, cunning and playfulness garner attention and sometimes, even respect. The form of verbal interactivity and dexterity common to IRC is similar to a certain style of talk described as the “man of words” by the famed folklorist of African-American cultures Roger Abrahams. “A man of words is nothing” explains Abrahams, “unless he can, on the one hand, stitch together a startling piece of oratorical rhetoric, and on the other, capture the attention, the allegiance, and the admiration of the audience through his fluency, his strength of voice and his social maneuverability and psychological resilience.” Abrahams differentiates between two categories of the man of words: one who displays stunningly crafted rhetorical flourishes in formal settings; the other, springs to life informally and spontaneously on the street corner, the yard, and especially over rum, speech characterized by playful, lewd, and more crass talk. Unsurprisingly, it is this latter type of verbal play and dueling common to IRC, although with some important differences, given the unique technological features of this technical space.

Despite the playful, sometimes brazen, and often boisterous atmosphere of laughter, pleasure, and verbal play common to IRC, Anonymous is still rather serious business, Which brings us to the second form of labor and interactivity crucial to gaining respect on the network. Anons (on AnonOps, among other Anonymous networks) acquire respect by engaging in *activist* interventions, some of them risky and illegal; there have been over two dozen arrests. By laboring toward collectively-defined political actions and by working on the infrastructure that supports this type of work (such as running an IRC server), individuals come to trust each other. One of the key operators and organizers of OpTunisia, which provided technology assistance to Tunisian activists in January 2011 and helped catalyze the string of Anonymous-led interventions in the Middle

East region, explained this dynamic as follows:

**BIELLA:** but i am trying to figure out how it is that people come to start working with others and trusting each other  
**BIELLA:** you seemed like a good person to ask as you have been around for a long time, know lots of folks, etc etc. it is just is so enigmatic and perhaps that is what it is  
**A:** well i think either doing something that gains you respect and in the process gets you ‘friends’  
**A:** also if people help me i feel inclined to help in return  
**BIELLA:** so what is an example of something you did that gained that respect (ofc keep it legal :-))  
**BIELLA:** and also can you elaborate on the ‘friends’ bit  
**A:** well i founded and coordinated op tunisia  
**BIELLA:** ok, yep, i can see why that would gain respect ;-)  
**BIELLA:** i did not know that  
**A:** so i worked very hard for a while 4hrs sleep a night online 20hrs a day  
**A:** for 2ish weeks  
**BIELLA:** and people started contributing and you all felt proolly close as a result  
**A:** yeah so up popped some individuals - who are now ‘famous’ and said can we help and i worked with them  
**BIELLA:** like hacker types you mean?  
**A:** yeah ;)

If Anons accrue respect from a combination of charismatic sociality and especially work, what about me? I am not running an IRC server, nor do engage in political actions. Certainly, all the hours I have poured into IRC has been central to forging lines of communication and building trust among (at least some) Anons. I can hold my own on IRC and I rather like chatting on IRC, which may explain why I have chosen to study geek and hacker worlds: collective worlds that are inseparable, at some fundamental level, from this communicative architecture. But at a certain point, it became patently obvious that my research was rather more complicated than simply “hard chatting on IRC.” I was also putting some labor into the collective pot. Indeed,

I hold the dubious distinction of teaching roughly two dozen reporters how to find Anonymous and how to get on IRC to interview them. For most of the winter and spring of 2011, I helped shuttle reporters onto the channel designated for them. I subjected myself to the mindless repetition of being interviewed over eighty times by journalists. I have answered the same questions over and over again in print, in TV and in film interviews. After a few months of doing this type of media-work—and it quickly came to feel like the drudgery associated with some forms of work—it became evident that I was gaining some access, respect, and trust via these appearances, many Anons peppering me with comments, reflections, praise, and critiques after they watched a news segment, read an opinion piece, or watched some public lecture.

My ethnographer's magic, to borrow a famous term coined long ago by Bronislaw Malinowski, may lie in how I handle myself in public lectures and the media: something I never expected when commencing this project. The work of ethnography is often about the private lives and thoughts of individuals or concerns public modes of interaction, not acting as the public face, in this case, of a faceless entity. I have earned some measure respect because I have worked assiduously to dispel myths. And I have had to literally engage in some cunning to do so, because so many journalists, especially in the United States and the UK, have been keen on slotting Anonymous in the role of raging hackers, led by a small cohort of leaders, or some other distortion.

In my many media appearances and talks, I state things that Anonymous themselves would not say (or would certainly put in different terms). Sometimes I just flat out contradict them. For instance, in the past, many Anons used to say “we are not hackers,” a claim that became much harder to make once the hack-as-leaking operations took off in March 2011. I would explain: there *are* hackers but Anonymous is not simply composed of hackers. And sometimes, most significantly, I am silent; there is a lot I don't say or even currently put into written word.

As I recently explained to one sympathetic reporter in a lengthy interview on the ins and outs of studying Anonymous:

*“There are things about Anonymous that I currently can't write about because I don't understand it well enough. You have to have some discretion because there are some back-room politics, and they need time*

*to develop before you make a claim about it.”*

I also explained that I might be caught up in webs of duplicity myself:

*“I'm aware that I am operating within webs of duplicity. While I've come to trust certain Anons and have more empathy than less, I'm also well aware that duplicity is the name of the game—misinformation and social engineering—and I'm being caught up in it myself,”* observed Coleman. *“But, if it was clear cut and transparent, it wouldn't be as effective politically.”*

If Abraham's identified the man of words, a mode of talk also integral to communicative life on IRC, it might be best to describe myself as *the woman of measured words*, at least when I appear in the media or when I give a talk. Since I am hyper-aware Anons will critically assess, even at times dissect my statements, I am quite deliberate in what I say and don't say in public, as I know this will affect and shape my access to them. This does not mean I am simply covered into silence. In fact, being blunt about certain issues—like acknowledging how I too may be the object of misinformation—has brought some measure of approval. But it is always a question of cunning and craft as to how, where, and when to make statements about Anonymous.

On IRC, like those around me, I often give way to the spontaneity of verbal play and meandering conversations. During my interaction with reporters, I take a distinct and measured stance. Most anons who pay attention to these things (many do not) witness these two sides, each performative in their own right, although requiring distinct forms cunning. Do these interactions—deliberate public media work and spontaneous socializing on IRC—make me Anonymous? □

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1 <http://www.deathandtaxesmag.com/157192/digital-activism-from-anonymous-to-occupy-wall-street-a-conversation-with-gabriella-coleman/>

► **OCCUPY SOURCING:** Occupy Wall Street rapidly re-created many of the functions of collective life—from libraries and kitchens to bureaucracies and markets. The working group structure is illustrated on the next page by Amira Pettus.

