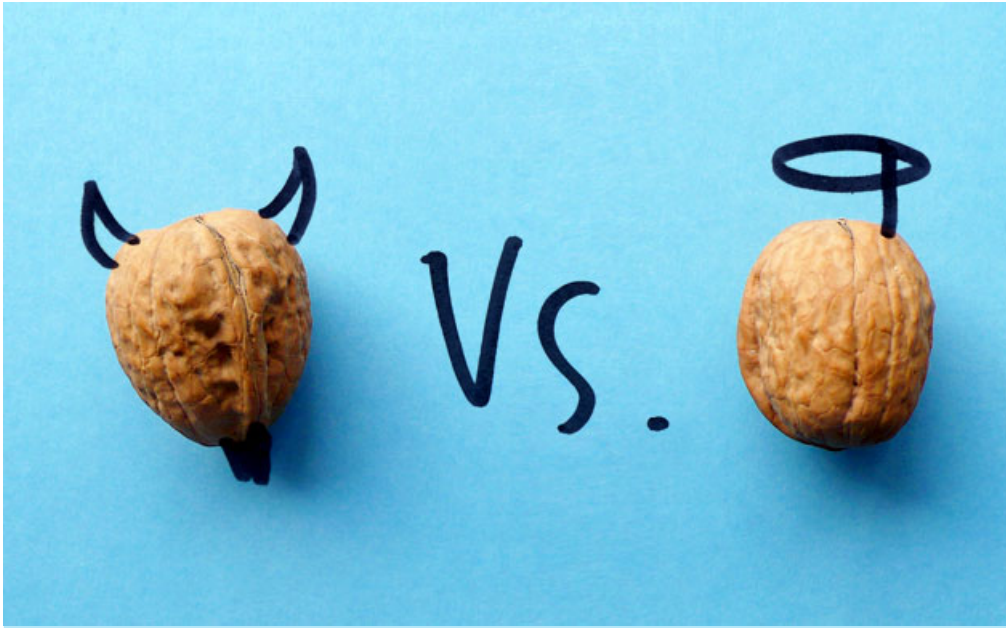


JULIAN DIBBELL CULTURE 09.21.09 12:00 PM

THE ASSCLOWN OFFENSIVE: HOW TO ENRAGE THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY



The Scientologists can't follow one simple bit of Internet wisdom: Don't feed the trolls. *Illustration: John Gall*

In the evening of January 15, 2008, a 31-year-old tech consultant named Gregg Housh sat down at the computer and paid a visit to one of his favorite Web sites, the message board known as [4chan](#). Like most of the 5.9 million people who visit the site every month, Housh was looking for a few cheap laughs. Filled with hundreds of thousands of brief, anonymous messages and crude graphics uploaded by the site's mostly male, mostly twentysomething users, 4chan is a fountainhead of twisted, scatological, absurd, and sometimes brilliant low-brow humor. It was the source of the lolcat craze (affixing captions like "I Can Has Cheezburger?" to photos of felines), the rickrolling phenomenon (tricking people into clicking on links to Rick Astley's ghastly "Never Gonna Give You Up" music video), and other classic time-wasting Internet memes. In short, while there are many online places where you can educate yourself, seek the truth, and contemplate the world's injustices and strive to right them, 4chan is not one of them.

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Yet today, Housh found 4chan grappling with an injustice no Internet-humor fan could ignore. Days earlier, a nine-minute video excerpt of an [interview with Tom Cruise](#) had appeared unauthorized on YouTube and other Web sites. Produced by the Church of Scientology, the clip showed Cruise declaring himself and his co-religionists to be, among other remarkable things, the “only ones who can help” at an accident site. For the online wiseasses of the world, the clip was a heaven-sent extra helping of the weirdness Tom Cruise famously showed on [Oprah](#). But then, suddenly, it was gone: Scientologists had sent takedown notices to sites hosting the video, effectively wiping it from the Web.

Housh and other channers knew that Scientology had a long history of using copyright law to silence Internet-based critics. But this time, maybe because the church was stifling not just unflattering content but potential comedy gold, the tactic seemed to inflame the chortling masses. That evening, Housh logged in to an IRC channel frequented by like-minded chuckleheads and started talking with five others about the Cruise video. There was a sense that something must be done, but what? One of them logged out and posted a call to action on 4chan and some similar sites. By the middle of the night, 30 people had joined the chat. Within a couple of days, a consensus emerged: They would take down the main Scientology Web site with a massive distributed denial-of-service attack, or DDoS.

By the time the attacks started on January 18, Housh and many of the now 200 others on the chat channel were devoting every spare moment to the cause: “We were like, OK, we have 24 hours today. None of us need to sleep. Get your caffeine. What’s the next step?”

Someone suggested they create a press release. Housh and four others broke off into a side channel to work on it while the DDoS attacks unfolded. They figured they should explain the goals of their spontaneous uprising, but what exactly were those goals? “We had no fricking clue what we were doing,” Housh says. “We didn’t mean to do it in the first place.” They were still more of a riot than a movement—a faceless, leaderless mob growing daily as new adherents flocked in. None of them knew one another, even by pseudonyms, since as a rule there was only one username throughout the community. In fact, it was a standing in-joke on 4chan and related sites that their collective output was the product of a single hive-mind entity, known by that same username: Anonymous.

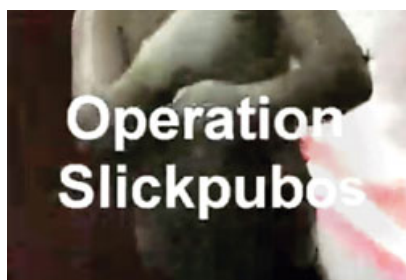
Instead of a press release, Housh and the others made a video introduction in the name and voice of the hive mind itself. Thrown together in a few days of furious collaboration, it appeared on YouTube on January 21, titled “[Message to Scientology](#).”

“Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous,” the clip began in a robotic, software-generated voice-over accompanied by stock footage of clouds rolling over desolate cityscapes. “Your campaigns of misinformation, your suppression of dissent, your litigious nature: All of these things have caught our eye,” the voice explained. “For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind—and for our own enjoyment—we shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.” The message ended, as it had begun, on a pitch-perfect note of sci-fi comic book menace: “We are Legion,” the robot voice intoned. “We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.”

The anonymous campaign against Scientology, better known among its participants as [Project Chanology](#), continues to this day. In the months since it launched “Message to Scientology,” Project Chanology has

employed a variety of tactics, including pickets, pranks, and propaganda that ranges from the purely informative to the ferociously satirical. It has waxed and waned and waned some more, and yet, improbably, it has endured, evolving into a peculiarly instructive case study in the dynamics of online protest. Project Chanology may well be the first movement to realize the kind of ad hoc, loosely coupled social activism that many have hoped the ad hoc, loosely coupled architecture of the Internet would engender. But it's also the first one founded on the principles of the most obnoxious innovation that architecture ever produced: trolling.

To troll is to post deliberately incendiary content to a discussion forum or other online community—say, kitten-torture fantasies on a message board for cat lovers—for no other reason than to stir up chaos and outrage. Trolling is (for the troll, at least) a source of amusement. But for Anonymous it has long been more like a way of life. Study the pages of the Encyclopedia Dramatica wiki, where the vast parallel universe of Anonymous in-jokes, catchphrases, and obsessions is lovingly annotated, and you will discover an elaborate trolling culture: Flamingly racist and misogynist content lurks throughout, all of it calculated to offend, along with links to eye-gougingly horrific images of mutilation, sexual perversity, and, yes, kittens in blenders. Here, too, are chronicled the many troll invasions, or "raids," that Anonymous has inflicted on unsuspecting Web communities—like the Epilepsy Foundation's online forums, which were attacked with flashing, seizure-inducing animations.



In one prank, Anonymous member Agent Pubeit slicked himself in petroleum jelly, pubic hair, and toenail clippings and waltzed into a Scientology office.

So, after the Tom Cruise video vanished and that first call to arms went out, the nameless multitudes of Anonymous—steeped in the theory and practice of trolling—were well prepared to answer it, even if some weren't convinced that they were up to the task. "Anonymous will never take down a massive multimillion-dollar corporation like Scientology," one Channer wrote. "You're not shutting down a fucking corporation with prank phone calls."

Indeed, the inherent challenges faced by an activist movement made up of trolls emerged almost as soon as Project Chanology got under way. In the IRC war rooms where the DDoS attacks were being coordinated, one Anonymous member redirected the fire of an entire raid onto what he said was a hidden Scientology IP address but turned out to be the Web site of a primary school in the Netherlands. A few days later, a middle-aged couple in Stockton, California, misidentified as Scientology counterhackers, woke in the middle of the night to harassing phone calls and death threats.

As news of the raid filtered out into the world beyond Anonymous, these blunders didn't do much for its public image. Not that Anonymous tended to care what others thought. In trolling, as a rule, the more people you piss off, the better; what matters are the lulz—the laughs you get from trashing someone's peace of mind. But this was a new game, in which public opinion seemed to matter, and so far Anonymous wasn't on top of it. A reflective mood seeped into the IRC channels; fingers were pointed. One participant said they could have done a lot more if they "weren't just a bunch of unorganized brats."

With the lulz wearing thin, Project Chanology was approaching that moment when a typical raid calls it quits. What Anonymous did next, however, was unprecedented in the annals of not just trolling but online activism in general: It executed a major midcourse correction. The site hacking stopped, and a new tactic was announced: A worldwide "RL raid" (real-life protest) on Scientology's offices would take place on February 10, 2008. When the day arrived, thousands of Anonymous members, many with their faces obscured by scarves or Guy Fawkes masks, turned out in scores of cities to protest lawfully and nonviolently (depending, of course, on your definition of nonviolence: In London, an Anonymous crowd carrying boom boxes subjected staffers in a Scientology building to a day of real-life rickrolling). A second protest followed in March, with numbers matching the original.

Now looking less like a swarm and more like a network, Project Chanology moved onto message boards of its own. Housh and others set up a site called [Why We Protest](#), which has become a hub for planning and discussion, ruled by the time-honored hacker protocols of rough consensus. "It's the hive mind at work," Housh says. A new idea or call to action can come from anyone but is vetted by everyone: "If it's bad, we laugh and make fun of you because that's what we do," Housh says. "But if it's good, it sticks." And as the movement's tactics evolved, so did its goals, narrowing from the destruction of Scientology to more realistic aims, focused on broadly exposing the church's alleged fraud and abuse.

Meanwhile, Scientology was hitting back. Working with law enforcement, the church pressed charges where it could. A New Jersey 18-year-old named Dmitriy Guzner was indicted for taking part in the Chanology DDoS attacks; he pleaded guilty this May. Housh was barred from coming within 500 feet of Boston-area Scientology buildings for a year (he cheerfully attends demonstrations in other cities now). But on their own, Scientologists have mounted a more personal countercampaign. Volunteer "handlers" have taken it upon themselves to monitor the actions of Anonymous, standing amid protesters and using video cameras to record anything incriminating or embarrassing. Private detectives and law enforcement have named hundreds of the most active Chanologists, lawyers have sent warning letters not only to their homes but also to their parents, and Anons claim that church members have papered their neighborhoods with flyers identifying them by name and face as members of a "terrorist organization."

"They are a terrorist organization," says Tommy Davis, a church spokesperson. "Their intention is to instill fear and incite hate. There is no other explanation." Leaning back into a cushioned chair in a suite of the church's posh Celebrity Centre in Hollywood, Davis holds in his lap a 2-inch-thick binder of Anonymous-related material. He has just finished reciting a litany of the bomb threats, death threats, arson threats, and acts of vandalism that were directed at Scientology churches and employees, including himself, in the first year of Project Chanology's existence. But he claims that, thanks largely to the church's vigorous response, the protest movement is "in its death throes."

THE PROTEST MOVEMENT IS IN ITS DEATH THROES.

If Chanology is dying, however, it's being awfully leisurely about it: After an early falloff, the numbers at the monthly protests have been roughly stable. The question, it seems, is no longer how a half-baked mob of Internet jackasses ever thought they could take on an organization as powerful and vindictive as Scientology but how Scientology could have failed to squash them long ago. And the answer may be that the church is incapable of following one simple bit of Internet wisdom: Don't Feed the Trolls. By taking Anonymous as seriously as it has, Scientology has nurtured the one thing Chanology depends on above all: the lulz.

That's not to say Anonymous hasn't faced some grave opposition, just that its toughest foe has turned out to be not Scientology but Anonymous itself.

It was early afternoon on January 8, 2009, almost a year after the birth of Project Chanology, when 18-year-old Anonymous member Agent Pubeit emerged from a subway station in New York City's Times Square clothed in nothing but a ski mask, shorts, sneakers, and surgical gloves. The temperature was just above freezing, but it's doubtful Pubeit felt the cold: A thick layer of petroleum jelly covered his exposed upper body, and this was thickened further by a generous admixture of pubic hairs and toenail clippings.

Pubeit was not alone. As he walked along the crowded sidewalk toward his destination—a Church of Scientology center on nearby West 46th Street—he was filmed by an accomplice with a video camera, and the two were in radio contact with more conspirators. As Pubeit got closer to his target, the remote team unleashed a rolling barrage of distractions on the Scientology center, tying up phone lines with prank calls and faxes. In the midst of this, Pubeit burst into the center's reception area and jogged around for a moment or two, leaving traces of hairy lube on whatever surfaces he could get close to. From there he proceeded to a nearby Scientology management office. Just inside the doorway, he found church materials loaded onto a cart, which he mounted for a few seconds of simulated man-cart love before fleeing into the city's streets.

"Greasy Vandal in Hate Crime vs. Scientology," read the New York Daily News headline. Two weeks later, Davis was citing the stunt as proof that Project Chanology is no more legitimate a protest movement than the KKK. "To have a man slathered in Vaseline and covered in pubic hair and toenail clippings storm in and begin desecrating a place of worship," Davis said with quiet outrage. "That puts it in perspective."

But the main target of Operation Slickpubes, frankly, wasn't Scientology at all. It was Chanology. Or more precisely, it was anyone in Chanology's ranks who had forgotten this was a movement created by and for trolls. Since the beginning of the campaign, there'd been a tension between its "lulzfags," who held that Anonymous must have no higher cause than its own cruel amusement, and the "moralfags," for whom the cause of fighting an oppressive cult was an end in itself. (Neither term is necessarily an insult. In chanter culture, the "fag" tag can be pejorative, neutral, or practically a term of endearment.) The tensions deepened after publicity attracted an influx of people unfamiliar with the rules of Anonymous. Not that these "newfags" turned the movement into a Boy Scout cookout. (Some Chanologists who asked to remain unidentified for this article said it was less for fear of Scientology than of their fellow Anons: "They'll call us 'egofags' and fuck with us relentlessly.") But Chanology's drift toward respectability has been more than some Anonymous traditionalists can bear.

Enter Operation Slickpubes, which, according to Michael Vitale, one of the New York City Anons who instigated the prank, was aimed squarely at reversing that drift. Anonymous members, he says, are "the assholes of the Internet" and should play that up, because ultimately the movement survives on attention—from the media, from potential recruits—and only one thing is sure to keep the attention coming: Anonymous' willingness to undertake what Vitale calls "any sort of motherfuckery." For him, it's not that the movement's ethical objectives don't matter. It's that taking them too seriously may, paradoxically, kill

Project Chanology before it has a chance to attain them.

"What is the public fascination with our war?" Vitale asks. In other words, why should anyone care about a struggle between a few thousand masked rickrollers and the adherents of a religion founded by a sci-fi writer? "It isn't because you have one group that's right and one group that's wrong. It's because you have two groups that are nut jobs for different reasons, and they are fighting each other in the streets." If Vitale is right, Chanology's greatest strength may be the other conflict—the tension between the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of lulz.

That is, of course, if that conflict doesn't end up being its fatal flaw.

On a Tuesday last winter, a Chicago Zoning Council committee met in a hearing room at City Hall. Among the attendees were representatives of the Church of Scientology seeking permission to build a new facility in the South Loop neighborhood. Opponents of the zoning change were also present, including seven Anons, decidedly out of their element. They had hoped to testify while masked but were informed that it was against the rules.

Their testimony was hit or miss, but mostly miss. They mumbled, they hemmed, they hawed. They tried to raise the church's record as a building owner in other locales, but the committee chair said it had no bearing on the question at hand. The zoning change passed.

The Anons filed out of the hearing room in an unusually contemplative mood and were surrounded instantly by gleeful Scientologists. Some church members were familiar to the Anons from previous encounters at Chanology protests, where they'd stood duty as impassive, cam-wielding handlers surrounded by the protestors' joyously obnoxious placards and chants. The Scientologists seemed delighted to be dishing out the smack this time around.

"Need a fire extinguisher?" one asked.

"For what?" an Anon replied tentatively.

"Down in flames!" the handler crowed.

All in all, the episode was not a bucket of lulz. It foregrounded a question that the typical troll need never concern himself with but that the troublemakers of Project Chanology must sooner or later confront: What meaningful difference are their actions making?

The Chicago zoning fight is not the only arena in which Chanology has groped toward conventional political activism. The revocation of Scientology's US tax-exempt status has long been a central goal of the movement. But efforts on this front remain nascent. Meanwhile, though Anons are fond of saying that their protests and propaganda have already hurt Scientology, this is no easier to verify than the church's claim that business has never been better. "Scientology has expanded more in the past year than the past five years," Davis says, "more in the past five years than the past five decades."

But if Project Chanology fails to upend Scientology in particular, it may yet change the landscape of political activism in general. Already some Anons are applying the Chanology formula to other targets. Operation Didgeridie and Project Cntroll are gearing up to troll the Australian and Chinese governments, respectively, for their Internet censorship policies. And when post-election unrest broke out in Iran in June, Why We Protest dedicated a whole wing of its forums to online activism in support of the Iranian opposition.

Then again, Chanology may turn out to be the sort of thing that can't be duplicated. It's unlikely that Anonymous will ever face an opponent more exquisitely matched than Scientology—a strictly disciplined,

hierarchical organization founded on the exact reproduction of relentlessly earnest, fiercely copyright-protected words. Here the assclowns of Anonymous found the perfect antithesis of their own radically authorless, furiously remixed, compulsively unserious culture. Scientology was a target so ideal that there is now almost no point in looking for another. Perhaps this, then, is how Project Chanology will be remembered: not as the first of a new breed of online protest movements, but as the last of the epic trolls.

Contributing editor Julian Dibbell (julian@juliandibbell.com) wrote about virtual gold trading in issue 16.12.

ONLINE EXTRA

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