



ANONYMOUS

VS

SCIENTOLOGY

A faceless, unstable virtual army masses to take on—and take down—the world’s most secretive and terrifying religion. An exclusive report from the front lines of a 21st-century battle.

BY DAVID KUSHNER ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC HEINZ

“Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous. Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation, your suppression of dissent, your litigious nature: all these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed...We are anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.”

*“Message to Scientology”
January 21, 2008*

IT’S AFTER MIDNIGHT ON MARCH 15 AT THE ELECTRIC Lotus, a hip Indian bar and restaurant in Hollywood, when the secret meeting begins. Five scraggly young men and a Goth girl with purple-streaked hair gather at a long dining table in a dark back room. An Asian dude urgently devours basmati rice as if he hasn’t eaten in days. A blond punk in a faded Pixies T-shirt and a black-and-white camouflage jacket keeps glancing furtively at the door.

Finally, a clean-cut 22-year-old in a T-shirt and jeans speaks up. No one here knows each other’s real name, so he introduces himself under his pseudonym, Ryan. “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow,” Ryan says as the others nod. “We don’t know what they’re capable of.”

Ryan’s talking about the Church of Scientology, and the group at this table are foot soldiers in an underground army that’s waging war against the controversial religion. They call themselves Anonymous, and with the zeal of crusaders and the flair of viral marketers, they have harnessed the Internet to assemble—and attack. They fired their first salvos in the vast, borderless void of the Web; lately they have mobilized in the real world. They take to the streets in Guy Fawkes masks and business suits, like extras in *V for Vendetta*, staging protests in over 100 cities, from Seattle to Sydney, sometimes with more than 10,000 people. Just like the one scheduled for 10 hours from now.

The Church of Scientology brands Anonymous cyberterrorists; Anonymous counters that the church is an oppressive, profit-hungry cult. To

a degree, they may both be right, and as highly sophisticated clandestine organizations they have more in common than either side would like to admit. The migration from cyberspace to the real world of Anonymous represents more than just a fight between two cutthroat combatants: It’s the electronic mob personified, a new dawn of social protest engineered by young people with tools most people over 30 doesn’t understand. “This is our generation’s movement,” says Sarah, a twentysomething “Anon,” as members call themselves. “Every 40 years someone stands up and does something. This is our generation’s way of doing something.”

As the others dig into their tandoori chicken, Ryan stands up to address some inherent challenges they face. “This is a big sociological experiment,” he says. “How does a group with no leaders organize?”

With a sense of both dread and excitement, Ryan outlines the plans for the next day, when the SoCal contingent of Anonymous will descend on Scientology’s L.A. headquarters. Though their group has an amorphous structure and no true chiefs, Ryan, an articulate video game developer from San Diego, is one of the main organizers. In a hushed voice awash in anxiety and paranoia—perhaps a natural by-product of an ongoing struggle with one of the world’s most feared religions—he says that “Rorschach,” one of the most active SoCal Anons, woke up to find a pool of vomited blood next to his cat Mudkips’ food dish. The dish smelled like ammonia. The cat was missing and hasn’t been seen since. Ryan admits he has no idea for sure who, if anyone, was responsible. ➤

"But this is the kind of thing Scientology does," Ryan says. "They poisoned his cat. They killed Mudkips."



MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 2008 STARTED LIKE ANY other day on YouTube. A balding guy with crooked glasses made chamomile tea in one video. Asian kids in a hot pink room danced to hip-hop in another.

Then, at 2 A.M., a nine-minute, 26-second clip appeared on the site under the seemingly benign title "Tom Cruise Scientology Video." Against an amber-hued backdrop, the now-infamous clip shows Cruise behaving as we'd never seen him before: passionate, zealous, and seemingly un-hinged as he discusses the virtues of his chosen religion. "Being a Scientologist, when you drive past an accident, it's not like anyone else. As you drive past, you *know* you have to do something about it because you *know* you're the only one that can really help," he intoned, *Mission Impossible*-like music playing in the background. "We are the authorities on the mind...We are the way to happiness."

In the video, intended as an internal piece of church propaganda, the star of *Risky Business* and *Top Gun* is by turns earnest and fanatical. It's a bravura performance, and one the general public was never intended to see.

Days earlier Marc Ebner, a journalist who has written about Scientology for many years, had been leaked the video, and urgently spread the word. "I wanted to put it up on my Web site, but I wasn't able to do it overnight, so I immediately put out a mass e-mail to all my friends in the media," he says. "Nick Denton at Gawker Media seemed to be the only guy up at two in the morning on a Sunday. He saw that these clips showed Cruise at his most insane and said, 'These are great! I want more!' So he posted them immediately."

"If Tom Cruise jumping on Oprah's couch was an eight on the scale of scary," gushed Denton on his site. "This is a 10." Denton uploaded the video to YouTube and posted a link from Gawker. Almost immediately, the video was everywhere. Then suddenly, on January 18, the video was gone. In its place was a message: This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by the Church of Scientology International.

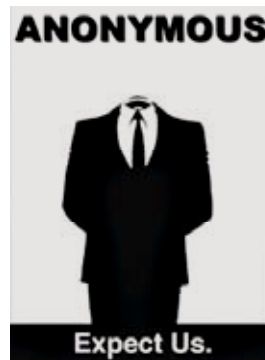
But the age of "no longer available" is no longer valid. The Napster generation expects content to be free and accessible, always and forever, online. So while the mainstream media were busy covering the Cruise story ad nauseam, a fringe, Web-based community was taking heed as well—and they didn't like what they saw.



THOUGHT IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO CHARACTERIZE ANY GLOBAL collective of unidentified people, Anonymous members largely fall into the category of young, tech-savvy, dark-humored Internet geeks. The community began coalescing on 4chan.

org, a massive image board founded in 2003 by an anime aficionado dubbed "Moot" as a place where users could upload and discuss random photos culled from the Web. Today it's the 56th most popular site in America. The funniest pictures and comments become running jokes called memes, many of which reach the mainstream: Rick Rolling (Rick Astley's goofy "Never Gonna Give You Up" video); the Lolcatz (shots of freaky felines with nonsensical captions); Tay Zonday's infamous "Chocolate Rain" clip, which racked up over 23 million hits on YouTube.

The point, besides laughs, is a sense of community and a celebration of free speech, and to foster it all users register under the same handle: Anonymous. They can say anything, and some do—hurling racist and homophobic epithets with abandon. Like an angry child, Anonymous



Top: An Anonymous protest outside a London Scientology center. When the Tom Cruise video (above left) was pulled from YouTube, the Anon army decided to declare war on the church.

will pick a target for its collective rage and lash out with frightening cruelty. The worst happens on a 4chan directory called "Random" or "/b/." Some of the group's stunts are harmless. Others, like when they pose as kids to entrap Internet pedophiles, or when they attacked the Web site of white supremacist leader Hal Turner, are arguably noble.

But at times the mob acts out ruthlessly, from flooding MySpace pages with gay pom to allegedly calling in bomb threats at the Super Bowl. On September 11, 2007, one user uploaded a photo of what appeared to be pipe bombs, with a message detailing plans to blow up his high school the next day. "I, along with two [o]ther Anonymous, will charge the building armed with a Bushmaster AR-15," he wrote. The kid was arrested the next day. A Fox News report branded Anonymous "hackers on steroids," "domestic terrorists," and an "Internet hate machine."



BY JANUARY 15, THE DAY THE VIDEO WAS YANKED, THE TOM Cruise discussion thread on 4chan turned into a call to arms. "I think it's time for /b/ to do something big," posted an Anonymous user at 7:37 P.M. "I'm talking about 'hacking' or 'taking down' the official Scientology Web site. It's time to use our resources to do something we believe is right. It's time to do something big again, /b/. Talk amongst one another, find a better place to plan it, and then carry out what can and must be done."

The Anons began doing what they do best: tapping the Internet's vast resources for their own goals. They started sharing the most outlandish stories they could find about Scientology: how the church was founded by L. Ron Hubbard, a middling science-fiction writer who believed that an intergalactic warlord name Xenu killed billions of beings, whose souls now infest humans. But more than the far-fetched origin story, it was the church's alleged earthbound practices that Anonymous found so ➤

disturbing: how the church functions more like a pyramid scheme than a traditional religion; its “disconnect” policy of splitting up families; its history of punishing wayward members. And perhaps most galling to the free-speech obsessives of Anonymous, the church’s campaign to silence dissent and intimidate critics. In 1965, Hubbard launched the policy of “fair game,” asserting that so-called enemies of the church “may be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist without any discipline of the Scientologist. May be tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed.” Though the church denies that the policy still exists, critics and former members insist nothing has changed.

For several days, Anonymous mustered its resources, discussing how they might strike and if it was even feasible:

—“mission impossible. a random image board can’t take down a pseudo-religion with the backing of wealthy people and an army of lawyers.”

—“then don’t get involved if you don’t think it’s possible.”

—“start small, Anon. The Web site, first. Maybe raid the forums, etc. etc. We are thousands strong, they can’t sue all of us.”

—“sounds good. LET THE RAID COMMENCE.”

So, on January 18, the faceless army known as Anonymous attacked.

Initially, the response took the form of typical “raids”: Scientology Web sites were hacked and overwhelmed with phantom users. Endless “black faxes” (pages filled entirely with a uniform black tone) spooled through Scientology fax machines, depleting ink cartridges and rendering them useless. Pizzas arrived at churches around the world, including a reported 300 at the headquarters in Amsterdam alone.

Finally, on January 21, after several days honing the video, the “Message to Scientology” hit YouTube like some mash-up of Nine Inch Nails and 1984. In a cryptic computerized voice-over, as dark time-lapse storm clouds rolled over an unnamed city, Anonymous let their mission be known: “We acknowledge you as a serious opponent, and we are prepared for a long, long campaign. You will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic. Your methods, hypocrisy, and the artlessness of your organization have sounded its death knell. You cannot hide. We are everywhere.”

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“ ANONYMOUS WAS BRANDED ‘HACKERS ON STEROIDS’ AND ‘DOMESTIC TERRORISTS.’ ”

centers in California had received suspicious packages of white powder. The church called in the FBI to investigate and released a statement branding Anonymous “cyberterrorists who hide their identities behind masks and computer anonymity.” That the powder turned out to be harmless was beside the point. “That wasn’t us,” Ryan insists, though he admits it’s inherently impossible to say who “us” was. Some Anons began wondering if the more malicious members of the community were forming a commando splinter group—a virtual special ops force. Others began to suspect that Scientology itself had conjured up the event.

Still, some veteran opponents of the church—such as 52-year-old Mark Bunker, a wry and avuncular TV producer who had been fighting the church for a decade—were concerned with Anonymous’ methods. On January 27, Bunker posted a message to Anonymous on YouTube. Despite his excitement that Anonymous was seeking to expose the truth about Scientology, Bunker challenged the group to put aside the hacker tricks and focus on political action. “The tactics Anonymous was using—like shutting down Scientology Web sites—were horribly wrong,” he told *Maxim*. But rather than becoming irate with him, Anonymous embraced Bunker and his message, affectionately dubbing him “Wise Beard Man.”

The day of Bunker’s message, a new video appeared on YouTube under the heading “A Call to Action.” The familiar robotic staccato voice called on Anonymous to take its crusade to the streets with real-world protests at church centers everywhere. “Be very wary of the 10th of February,” the voice warned.

So, on February 10, Anonymous finally moved offline. It was a momentous occasion: In hundreds of cities across the globe, thousands of protesters gathered dressed in outlandish costumes. Outside the Scientology church on Hollywood Boulevard, Bunker, Ebner, and other old-school opponents of the religion joined Anonymous members carrying signs reading SCIENTOLOGY DESTROYS FAMILIES, HONK FOR XENU, and RELIGION SHOULD BE FREE. It was a sight unlike anything they’d seen before. For decades the church had been notorious for targeting critics, but here were critics who were, by their very design, impossible to pin down.

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WITHIN FOUR DAYS, “MESSAGE TO SCIENTOLOGY” HAD racked up 800,000 views, but in the meantime some of the more nefarious elements of Anonymous seemed to be acting out on their own. News reports surfaced that 24 Scientology



IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE SCIENTOLOGY struck back. On March 12 the church posted a video on YouTube: “To inform Anonymous members who may be unaware of the criminal acts committed by their leaders, and to prevent others from being misled by Anonymous propaganda, the church has pro- ➤

THE OFFENDIX

Decoding the strange, underground world of Anonymous



4chan [fɔrˈtʃæn] n.

A virtual home base to Anonymous. 44 separate image boards with topics from porn to anime, 4chan’s no-registration policy lets users post any comment as “Anonymous.”

/b/ [bɛ] n.

With over 137 million posts, /b/ (or Random) is the most trafficked board on 4chan and is marked by dark humor, inside jokes, and rampant homophobia and racism.

“Chocolate Rain” [tʃɒkəˈleɪt ræn] n.

This bizarre YouTube smash’s composer credits his subsequent Dr Pepper commercial and Weezer cameo to 4chan.



Lolcatz [lɒlˈkɑːts] n.

Felines with added, occasionally funny captions in “lolspeak,” an unruly version of pigeon English.



Lulz [lʊlz] n.

The bastardization of LOL. “It’s all for the lulz” has become something of an Internet philosophy—from bomb threats to toying with pedophiles in chat rooms, it’s all for fun.

Meme [mɛm] n.

Coined as a scientific unit of cultural evolution, meme became a quick descriptor of a running Internet joke, video, or idea that has pervaded the mainstream, e.g., Lolcatz.

Mudkips [mʊdˈkɪps] n.

A creature in the Nintendo game Pokémon, mudkips became comic after a tale posted on /b/ described a plushy ‘kip, a teen, and an act of intercourse. Look it up yourself.

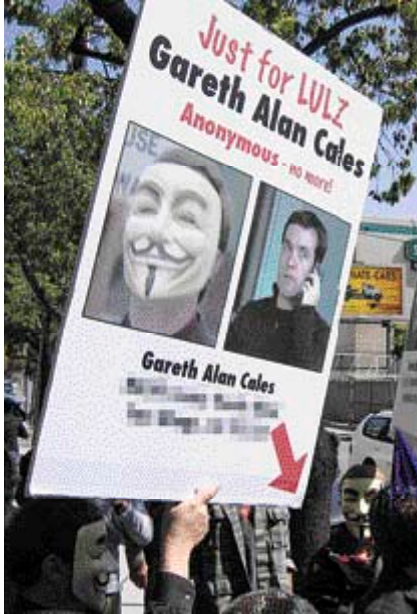
Rick Rolling [rɪkˈrɒl ɪŋ] v.

Disguising links so they lead not to the intended destination but to Rick Astley’s video “Never Gonna Give You Up.”



Epic Fail Guy [epɪk fɑɪl gɪ] n.

Originally a stick figure that made appearances on 4chan posts. An Anonymous’ addition of a Guy Fawkes mask made him a mascot of any unfunny 4chan thread.



At the March 15 rally in L.A., masked Scientologists infiltrated the Anons, seeking to ID leaders like Gareth, a.k.a. Ryan (left). The protest was held on the birthday of L. Ron Hubbard (right).

duced a video to provide the facts.” In the video, a disembodied voice runs through a litany of acts: “While claiming they are peaceful, in less than three weeks Anonymous members made or encouraged 8,139 harassing or threatening phone calls, 3.6 million malicious e-mails, 1.41 million hits against church Web sites, 10 acts of vandalism, 22 bomb threats, and eight death threats against members and officials of the Church of Scientology. These are the facts.”

As far as the church is concerned, “Claims of altruistic purposes enunciated in Anonymous’ statements to the press are no different than those by any cyberterrorist or hate groups.” In a 10-page letter to *Maxim*, Karin Pouw, Scientology’s director of public affairs, likened Anonymous’ actions to those of the Nazis and the KKK: “The church and its parishioners seek only to halt the illegal campaign of violence, terror, and intimidation perpetrated by individuals who call themselves Anonymous.”

Scientology wasn’t taking any chances, though. A video posted March 13 revealed the identities, and faces, of three Anons, including Rorschach, Ryan’s friend whose cat went missing later that day.

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IT’S THE MORNING OF MARCH 15, AND RYAN AND THE OTHERS slip into their business suits and Guy Fawkes masks to head for the protest. Today is L. Ron Hubbard’s birthday celebration, so Ryan dons a shiny purple party hat. When they join hundreds of other protesters outside Big Blue—their nickname for the church on Sunset Boulevard—several Scientologists stand waiting to greet them. Clean-cut young men and attractive women in khakis and buttoned blue shirts mill in front of the entrance, above which rises a multicolored balloon arch. For now police keep the protesters corralled across Sunset on the sidewalk in front of the Kaiser Permanente medical center, but as the crowd swells, ever more Anons cross the boulevard toward the church.

Among the protesters, a party atmosphere prevails. In addition to countless Anons in Guy Fawkes masks, there’s Snow White, Freddy Krueger, Spider-Man, Richard Nixon, and Optimus Prime. As the number of protesters grows—eventually to 600—they begin to chant, “Tax the cult! Tax the cult!” A plane flies overhead with the banner HONK/YELL IF YOU THINK SCIENTOLOGY IS A CULT. With each car that honks, Ryan and the others cheer and pump their fists. TV crews mill about, interviewing Anonymous members as well as old-guard anti-Scientologists such as Bunker. But the Scientologists have also come prepared, mounting a 12-foot video monitor near the entrance to Big Blue to drown out the noise.

Suddenly, an Anonymous protester with a red bandanna covering his face comes sprinting down the sidewalk. “A gun!” he yells. “There’s a guy with a gun!” Soon more Anons nervously chime in.

They’re talking about an elderly man with a white beard, white hair, glasses, a beige blazer, and brown pants. Rumors spread that he’s a

private eye working for the church, and though police question him, he’s ultimately let go. An Anon rushes up to videotape the scene and asks the man, “Why would you bring a gun to a peaceful protest?”

“I’m not here for a peaceful protest, friend,” he replies.

“Well, you got people upset because you’re brandishing a gun,” the Anon says.

“I’m not brandishing anything,” the old guy replies, palms upturned. He quickly disappears behind the barricades.

At around 1 P.M., a bustle of activity stirs on the sidewalk near Ryan. Beneath a cluster of trees across Sunset, two ostensible protesters in Guy Fawkes masks huddle next to him. Each holds an identical sign. At the top it reads JUST FOR LULZ. Below are two photos: one of Ryan in a Guy Fawkes mask and one of Ryan unmasked. Below the picture is his full name and address, with the message: ANONYMOUS NO MORE. A red arrow points down at Ryan where he stands.

With every move the pair trail him as others in Fawkes masks close in. “I’m Gareth!” one Anon begins shouting, using Ryan’s now-revealed real name. Other masked protesters join in, like the scene in *Spartacus*. “I’m Gareth!” Soon they’re all shouting, “I’m Gareth!” And, of course, there’s no way to tell who is real or fake.

But the actual Gareth is reeling. After pacing around, he jumps into a getaway car driven by his friends. They careen away, checking in the rear-view mirror at a silver Toyota Sienna minivan in hot pursuit. One Anon takes pictures of the van. Another writes down the plates. The chase goes on for 30 minutes, until they make a last-second exit off the freeway.

“It’s one thing when Scientologists go after other people,” Gareth says as the car weaves in and out of traffic. “It’s another when it happens to you.” The photo on the sign seems to have been taken in his garage in San Diego. “They must have followed me there,” he says. He worries about his family and friends and the harassment they might face. “The guy with the sign asked how Rorschach was.”

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IT’S DIFFICULT TO SAY WHAT THE NEXT BATTLE IN THE WAR will entail and how long the Anonymous crusade will last. After all, the YouTube generation has a tendency to bore easily, and it’s possible that some new target will catch the fancy of Anonymous, that they’ll collectively shift course like a flock of birds or an easily distracted child. But the damage may well be done. The Church of Scientology has always maintained power by controlling its secrets, and the Internet has lifted that veil of secrecy. For decades protesters have preached the evils of the church, and in Anonymous the traditional anti-Scientologists have finally found the muscle they need.

Still, despite evidence that enrollment in the church is dwindling, Scientology claims to be stronger than ever. “You are missing the real story,” Karin Pouw, the church representative, told *Maxim*. “In fact, the Church of Scientology has expanded more in the last five years than in the previous five decades combined.”

While Anonymous has more protests on the horizon, there’s already talk about applying its full-frontal assaults to other targets: politicians, warmongers, polluters. And Anonymous may not have to stay masked forever. As Marc Bunker notes, “Eventually you have to man up, stand up, and be counted. You’re going to have more believability if you show your face and people can look at you and see you.”

When asked how he feels now that he has been unmasked, Ryan falls quiet before admitting to a feeling that surprises him: empowerment. While there remains a certain safety in being unknown, Ryan is ready to come out and take a stand, and he doesn’t care who knows his real name. He’s Gareth Alan Cales. “Now I don’t have to worry about hiding anymore,” he says. “There’s a sense that I can do anything.”