

# Hacking group activist's posts land him in trouble

October 6 2012, by Nomaan Merchant

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Barrett Brown has, at times, called himself an author, a freedom fighter and a spokesman for the movement of hacker-activists known as Anonymous.

In tweets and videos, Brown praises Anonymous' work, rips his opponents and repeatedly lashes out at his biggest nemesis: the FBI.

Now, his online postings have landed him in federal prison.

The 31-year-old Brown is charged with making Internet threats and retaliating against law enforcement in a three-count federal indictment that quotes dozens of his tweets and YouTube videos. One of those videos, posted just before his arrest last month, includes a promise to ruin an FBI agent's life and "look into his (expletive) kids."

Brown is in custody in a Fort Worth prison. He is scheduled to have an Oct. 18 hearing to determine his mental competency. Both the FBI's Dallas office and Brown's attorney, Doug Morris, declined to comment about the case.

Like many associated with the shadowy movement of cyber-rebels, Brown was a rabid social media user whose posts veered from serious to emotional to profane. In several [tweets](#), he said federal agents were investigating him. He posted that he was angry at the FBI, and in one tweet on Sept. 11 quoted in the indictment, he said his mother was being threatened with charges.

Sometimes Brown hinted that he was considering violence.

"As I'll explain further tomorrow, I will regard any further armed raids as potential (hash)Zeta assassination attempts and respond accordingly," Brown wrote, referencing the notorious Mexican drug cartel.

Brown directed several profanities at one agent he identifies as Robert Smith. In the last video posted before his Sept. 12 arrest, Brown suggested Smith's life is "over," and posted an email address for viewers to "send all info" on Smith.

"But when I say his life is over, I don't say I'm going to go kill him," Brown said. "But I am going to ruin his life and look into his (expletive) kids."

Willing to speak for a movement that prides itself on [anonymity](#), Brown was a de facto spokesman quoted in various media, including The Associated Press, before bowing out ahead of a book deal that he claimed reached six figures. Many in the Anonymous movement decry the cigarette-toting Texan as a fame-obsessed fabulist who cashed in on lazy journalists' need to find a spokesman for everything.

But his relentless energy and off-the-wall antics also drew a measure of support, according to Gabriella Coleman, a leading expert on Anonymous who holds the Wolfe Chair in Scientific & Technological Literacy at McGill University. She has met with Brown in person and communicated with him online.

"He put work into the network," she said in a telephone interview. "He was very, very involved."

Brown channeled much of his energy into Twitter, where he mocked journalists for being cowardly or mediocre, feuded with online foes or

appealed for help on his crowd-sourced journalism project, which he hoped would help expose the inner workings of a surveillance industry he saw as totalitarian and corrupt.

Brown described himself as an "anarcho-pragmato-capitalist and quietist with militant and net-organizational tendencies" and—perhaps jokingly—acknowledged having a messiah complex. His stunts occasionally took a turn for the bizarre—he hosted a video chat while taking a bubble bath—and sometimes devolved into angry name-calling and threats.

"He definitely engaged in trollish behavior," Coleman said.

In the eyes of authorities, some of that behavior was criminal. The indictment announced Thursday charges Brown with [Internet threats](#), conspiracy to make publically available restricted personal information of a government employee and retaliation against a federal law enforcement officer.

According to Jay Leiderman, a former attorney for Brown who is still friends with him, it was the first case he had seen in which an Anonymous activist was prosecuted based only on statements made online.

Leiderman declined to comment specifically on the indictment, but said others connected to Anonymous—some of whom use social media as frequently as Brown—were "taken aback."

"The thing about free speech and free expression is people that are interested in it are by their very nature always tending to explore the boundaries," Leiderman said. "In a society that prizes free expression and one that has a great premium upon the marketplace of ideas, it's hard to say that someone went too far in expressing themselves when really no

harm was done."

But Richard Roper, a former U.S. attorney for Dallas now at the law firm Thompson & Knight, called Brown's attempt to get personal information about an FBI agent's family "a huge red flag."

"As far as legal proof, the question would be, is it a mere conditional threat where it's really just some vitriolic hyperbole or is it something that really indicates this individual is going to take action," Roper said. "When you cross the line, it's certainly going to be a criminal charge."

Eugene O'Donnell, professor of law and police science at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, said authorities often discern between angry chatter and a criminal threat by deciding how plausible and specific it is, as well as the context.

"When you read (Brown's statements), some of it is quite chilling in terms of a lot of mentions of guns and death and things like that," O'Donnell said.

Letting Brown's words go unchallenged could lead others to post similar things online or take things further, O'Donnell said.

"If those threats were going to be ignored in this case, that would more than likely embolden a lunatic fringe," he said. "You kind of have to nip these things in the bud."

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Citation: Hacking group activist's posts land him in trouble (2012, October 6) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-hacking-group-activist.html>

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