

How the global press reports on the 'hactivism' of Anonymous

May 20 2015, by Claire Spence

A study of global media reporting on the activities of the 'hactivist' group Anonymous has revealed that the press generally portrays them as simple pranksters – even though the vast majority of their operations are motivated by the defence of free speech or political causes.

To reach this conclusion, Howard University academic Adam G. Klein undertook content and frame analysis of 200 articles from 44 [media outlets](#) in 10 different countries over the space of a year. His research, published in the National Communication Association's Communication Monographs, analysed the specific characteristics given to Anonymous in the press as well as the general tone of the coverage. He also studied the media response to four 'operations' in depth, including attacks on the websites of the Los Angeles Times and PayPal.

Klein found that the press framed Anonymous in one of four ways: legitimate activists, vigilante heroes, global threats or malicious pranksters – with the last two more common than the first two. "The findings presented a stark disparity between the news media's interpretation and the hacktivists' own words and actions," Klein writes. "In fact, of the 200 articles examined, 108 (54%) covered Anonymous in a negative light, more than double the number of positive news stories (25%). Such a clear indication of the news media's adverse response to Anonymous was found in story after story in which the journalists trumpeted the actions of hackers as damaging, disruptive and/or criminal."

Klein further argues that "The research showed how the global press was typical in its framing of hactivists as being mere pranksters in spite of available evidence pointing to concrete motives, such as the fight for government transparency or defence of gay rights." Furthermore, the media tended to focus on the victims of hactivism, "downplaying or altogether disregarding the group's motivations". Klein also notes that in the articles casting Anonymous members as pranksters, "they were seldom referred to as 'hactivists', or with any distinction that would give explanation to their actions."

Several factors may account for the [global media](#)'s surprisingly negative view of Anonymous. Klein suggests that "political-economic forces, namely pro-corporate and self-preserving inclinations of big media" could account for their adverse response to many specific operations, especially those directed at "allies or institutional interests." Despite any common ground as '[media](#) activists' it may also be difficult for traditional news outlets, generally in favour of [free speech](#), to legitimise the invasive forms of protest that silence others, as favoured by the 'hactivists'.

More information: "Vigilante Media: Unveiling Anonymous and the Hactivist Persona in the Global Press." [DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2015.1030682](#)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

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