

**RUNNING HEAD: EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: Anonymous and The
Rehtaeh Parsons' Case**

**EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: Anonymous
And The Rehtaeh Parsons' Case**

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Abstract

The public sphere is an important concept first proposed by Jurgen Habermas. It posits that the public sphere is a space where public opinion is formed and that all citizens have a role to play. Yet this construction has been critiqued by those who argue, convincingly, that the public sphere is not an equal space – women, minorities, LGBT community members and the poor have not had the same share of voice as others.

The emergence of the Internet and in particularly digitally mediated communities on social media networks like Twitter changes the dynamic, making the public sphere a more expansive and inclusive space.

Groups like Anonymous have taken advantage of this opportunity. While Anonymous began as a group of what could charitably be termed online pranksters, it has assumed a much more activist stance. Its new purpose is evident in the role it played in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons.

Parsons, a young woman from Nova Scotia, was sexually assaulted. Images of the incident were shared through digital channels, and the names of the alleged rapists were known in the community. No charges were laid in the incident. Parsons suffered horribly as result of this attack and with her mental health rapidly declining, she committed suicide.

Shortly after her death, Anonymous began #OpJustice4Rehtaeh, an online and offline effort intended to bring Rehtaeh's attackers to justice by forcing police to reopen the investigation. Anonymous brought considerable scrutiny to the case, not just in North America, but around the world. It also prompted a wider conversation about the prevalence of what is termed rape culture. While police did eventually reopen the case, and ultimately filed lesser charges against two men, they denied the Anonymous played any role in the decision.

Anonymous' role in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons is illustrative of the expanding nature of the public sphere, and the ability for individuals to work together in online channels to exert influence on traditional institutions of power. It forces us to redefine the public sphere and to expand our understanding of the role of media in informing and directing public opinion and policy setting. Yet it also highlights the tensions inherent in this new reality, as groups like Anonymous operate without concern of the restraints and individual rights that define the rule of law. It expands the public sphere yet creates a new ethical and moral quandary.

Introduction

The concept of the “public sphere,” first articulated by German theorist Jurgen Habermas, has been an important conceptual construct in the attempt to understand the role of public opinion in shaping the decision-making of institutions, and particularly of government.

Almost since it was first proposed, Habermas’ public sphere came under critical consideration for its many gaps by academics including Lincoln Dahlberg (2014) and Nancy Fraser (1990) – who argue that it ignores the impacts of gender differences, racial differences and socio-economic differences.

Yet the idea of the public sphere is persistent. In democracies, the “vox populi” does have considerable influence on political and corporate decisions. However, measuring and quantifying that influence remains a challenge.

The rise of the Internet and the collection of web properties and technologies often known as Web 2.0, which includes popular social networking sites, brings fresh focus to the idea of the public sphere. People have, quite literally at their fingertips, the ability to express an opinion on any given matter on media comments section and through social media networks. That opinion is then aggregated with others, which gives it the appearance of influence, and perhaps, actual influence.

To some, like Clay Shirky (2011) and Yochai Benkler (2006), this ushers in a new era of the public sphere, a revitalization of the original concept where its limitations are addressed by the opportunities of individual voice and collective action offered by the Internet and digitally mediated communications. All someone needs is a device and Internet connection to make a comment on Facebook, Twitter or in the comments section of a major media outlet, to express their view and to help shape public opinion. That can, it is hoped, create a more robust and egalitarian public sphere, where participants are truly equal and gender, race, class and economic status are no longer factors in determining relative influence.

That is clearly utopian thinking, but there is little doubt that the web and social media have created new opportunities for participation in the public sphere. Yet there is an argument that this is nothing more than what some, including Evgeny

Morozov (2009), call “slactivism” – that clicking “Like” on a Facebook post about an issue of social justice does nothing to truly advance a cause, but allows the individual to feel like they have made a contribution. This, some further posit, actually serves as disservice to actual progress.

Beyond the individual, the web and digitally-mediated networked technologies have made it possible for new actors to engage in the public sphere (West, 2013). These groups are often distributed, lack a traditional leadership hierarchy, and simply don’t play by the traditional “rules.”

Wikileaks and the Occupy Wall Street movement are examples of these new actors who have used the power of social media and networked structures to carve out an important role in the evolved public sphere. Their actions, both made possible and amplified by networked technologies, have had significant influence on political discourse both in North America and around the world.

Another major example of this is the group known as Anonymous, often referred to as a “hacktivist” collective, with hacktivist being neologism conjoining the words hacker and activist. But considering Anonymous as a single group, or even a collective with an agreed upon purpose and strategy, is simplistic.

Anyone can be Anonymous. There is no CEO, no Executive Director or Board of Directors. The decision to embrace an issue can start with a single person – anywhere – and grow from there. A group simply becomes part of Anonymous when enough people agree that it is thus. Still, that type of agreement should not be equated with public consensus on an issue. Rather it is another example of the multiplicity of publics now present within the broader public sphere, and the power of small yet effective, even potentially powerful, communities of interest to form.

The power of Anonymous to influence the discussion in the public sphere and the actions of traditional institutions of power came into sharp focus in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, a young Halifax woman. She was sexually assaulted and, with her mental health spiralling downward, committed suicide.

The young men who assaulted Parsons took photos of the incident, and shared the images through texts to their friends. The cyberbullying of Parsons did not stop there, and played a considerable role in her declining mental health.

Despite the visual evidence of her assault contravening, at a minimum, child pornography laws in Nova Scotia, and that the names of the young men who assaulted Parsons were known within the community, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police did not pursue charges in the case, suggesting there was not enough evidence to ensure a conviction. The case, another sad example of rape culture in North America, may have stopped there, except for Anonymous.

A group of Anonymous activists decided to become involved in the case. They launched #OpJustice4Rehtaeh, a campaign to force government and law enforcement in Nova Scotia to bring the people who assaulted Parsons to justice. A video posted on YouTube by Anonymous Canada (2013a) indicated they knew the names of two of the four men who committed the assault and would quickly be able to identify the other two men. The video said that they would release the names of the men if the RCMP did not reopen the investigation and bring charges against them. This created widespread attention of the issue, engaging people online and driving mainstream media attention. By any reasonable measure, the pressure exerted by Anonymous had some effect, bringing the tragic case of Rehtaeh Parsons to a wider audience, prompting a conversation about rape culture, and increasing scrutiny on how the legal system responded.

In less than a week, the Crown Prosecutor and RCMP re-opened the case while denying that the efforts of Anonymous had anything to do with their decision.

The role of Anonymous is both instructive and troubling. It demonstrates a new sense of power to engage and influence the public sphere. Anonymous, through its actions and savvy manipulation of media, created power, and exerted that power to achieve its goal of pressuring the RCMP to press charges, to deliver justice for Rehtaeh Parsons. While the traditional media use images and messages to coerce behaviour, social media takes part of that power out of their hands and gives it, or at least some measure of it, to the people on those platforms. While traditional media is still important, social media is creating a more inclusive yet complex public sphere.

Yet this is often described, not inaccurately, as vigilante justice. The “anons” in the Rehtaeh Parsons case were not accountable to anyone; indeed they literally

hid behind Anonymous' trademark Guy Fawkes mask. They did not have to meet the same standards as the Nova Scotia Crown Prosecutors or RCMP. They operated outside the rule of law and used public outrage – leading the dialogue in the public sphere – as a coercive tool to drive the institutional behaviour they desired.

A similar situation, in Steubenville, Ohio, generated an even more aggressive, and morally contentious, response. In a rape case involving local high school football players, Anonymous became involved in active police investigation, posting the names of individuals who turned out to be innocent and defacing police and school websites.

An incident on the online forum Reddit, which is the ninth most popular web site in the United States (Alexa, 2016), is also instructive in any attempt to understand the influence of digital communications channels on the public sphere. Reddit is a community driven site where users are free to set up “subreddits” on almost any topic imaginable. It is majority owned by the large publishing company Conde Nast. In the aftermath of the 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon, Reddit users (Kaufman, 2013) worked together to try to identify the bombers, combing through data and footage of the scene. They surfaced a suspect, a missing Brown University student, who they believed was the bomber. The news spread quickly to mainstream media coverage.

Their conclusion turned out to be wrong. The missing student had actually committed suicide but his body had not yet been found. This added considerable stress to the young man's family. In response, Reddit's site manager posted an apology (2013), stating that, “though started with noble intentions, some of the activity on Reddit fueled online witch hunts and dangerous speculation which spiraled into very negative consequences for innocent parties.”

As Leslie Kaufman wrote (2013) of the incident in the New York Times:

Reddit went from a font of crowdsourced information to a purveyor of false accusations, to the subject of a reprimand by the president of the United States himself, to the center of another furious debate about the responsibilities of digital media.

The idea of that “digital media” has responsibilities is a curious thought when the reality is that social media platforms and sites like Reddit are merely platforms for communication by individuals.

That aside, we are still left with a troubling question – is the rise of communities like Reddit and groups like Anonymous as powerful actors within the public sphere a good thing? Does Anonymous represent a positive step forward in how we assess and consider the role of new, loosely affiliated actors in the public sphere? Or does it create an opportunity to allow the “tyranny of the crowd,” what effectively becomes mob rule, to drive public opinion and thus shape the policy decisions of the institutions of power?

The Internet, and social media, is one of the most significant changes in the way humans connect, interact and learn. It is a quantum leap from the “one-way” or “one-to-one” communication mediums that preceded it – the printing press, telegraph, radio and television. The implications of this change are difficult to completely understand as we are in the midst of a societal transformation – from people organizing protests for democracy through social media in Iran and Egypt to American presidential candidate Donald Trump short-circuiting political communication norms through his use of Twitter.

One thing seems certain – the change to more diverse, digitally mediated public-making is profound and does create the opportunity to drive different social, cultural and economic outcomes. Still that does not necessarily mean the opportunity creates a socially positive result. This thesis is an attempt to understand the networked production of political power in the context of the influence of Anonymous on the case of Rehtaeh Parsons. Does it create real power or is it simply more noise and less signal in our already cluttered online lives? Is Anonymous an example of the renewal of the public sphere, or its further degradation into irrelevance?

Research Question

The thesis will seek to answer the following interconnected questions:

Are networked communication technologies, particularly social media, reinvigorating the concept of the public sphere while addressing the problems with Habermas' model? Does a changed public sphere allow for the emergence of new players, like the "hacktivist" group Anonymous, that expands and reorders the power relationships within the public sphere? Is the case of Retheah Parsons, a Halifax teen who was sexually assaulted and ultimately committed suicide, prompting the involvement of Anonymous, an example of this new paradigm in action? Is Anonymous a repudiation or reification of the public sphere? Is it a positive step forward, or something that marks a troubling emergence of unaccountable forces of influence?

Hypothesis / Research Statement

While the public sphere is an important concept, its weaknesses have rendered it problematic. The growing corporatization of mainstream media, a key part of Habermas's public sphere, further undercuts its traditional value as most media simply restates the views of traditional powers actors such as government, police or military, and big business. There is little independent thought offered to others in the public sphere. But the emergence of the Web 2.0, and networked communications like social media, are reshaping how public opinion is made in public spaces outside the control of the state and changing the nature of what we consider "media" in our conceptualization of the public sphere. These technologies enable information and ideas to spread organically, without requiring traditional media or other channels. These technologies have also created a new category of actors in the public sphere, non-hierarchical, loosely affiliated groups like Anonymous have become credible players in informing the public and fostering behaviours. Yet moral authority is not the

same as legal authority, and there are no checks and balances with groups like Anonymous, rendering their actions morally contentious.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Habermas and the Public Sphere

The idea of the public sphere was first put forward by sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas as a way to conceptualize the influence of those with a voice, yet not an official role, in the polity. It reflects the reality that in democracies, and even those societies that lack democratic institutions, the sentiment of the public can have a direct impact on public policy and the actions of non-state actors. We often term this “public opinion”.

Habermas defined (1974) the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (p. 49). Habermas argued that all members of a society are part of the public sphere but an effective public sphere has certain needs: “Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion-that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions-about matters of general interest” (p. 49).

Habermas (2009) identified three types of power in the public sphere: 1) political power (which requires legitimation), 2) economic power, and 3) media power. Members of the public sphere in democracies can exert influence beyond elections as their views shape the actions of elected officials and those who seek to replace them. Economic power can be considered with the phrase “voting with their wallets” as people make economic choices based on their opinions and perceptions. Mass media power reflects the historic importance of mass media in democracies and the role they play in reflecting the views of the public in ways that direct the agenda of debate.

The public sphere emerged first in Western Europe in the 18th century (Habermas, 1964). Rodney Besson (2009) found that the emergence of new forums of communication in Western Europe helped foster the evolution of the:

[S]mall-scale bourgeois public sphere, of coffeehouses, salons, and small political journals challenged the principle of traditional feudal rule and brought into being a new basis for authority: the consensus emerging from the public's open-ended, critical argumentation and debate. (p. 176)

The public sphere stands as a way for citizens to direct or place limits on the actions or the behavior of the state or non-state actors who count considerably on the legitimacy it provides. Nancy Fraser (1990) defines the public sphere as, "an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction." (p. 57) Yet the word "institutionalized" suggest a formality of the structure that may not exist today, or ever have existed. The public sphere is inherently informal, lacking a defined organized structure. Fraser also notes that the public sphere is conceptually distinct from the state, writing that, "[I]t is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state" (p. 57).

The theory of the public sphere is a framework for how we assess the formation and influence of public opinion. According to Lincoln Dahlberg (2014), the Habermas concept has, "...become very influential in communication theory and research...This influence is not only because of the wide uptake of Habermas' conception in democratic theory, but because it offers a communication-centered understanding of the role that social actors and institutions should take in democratic processes, providing for both the evaluation and guidance of practice." (p. 21)

It is important to understand that the public sphere does not directly shape the action of governments or non-state actors. Rather as Mark West (2013) quoting Habermas, notes it "points" the administrative power in the correct direction (p. 157). The public sphere creates a tension between the will of the people (or some large enough segment of the people to create political, economic and or media issues) and institutions (governmental, corporate or non-governmental) that forces them to adjust their actions in response. This is not a clearly demarcated process.

Issues With the Public Sphere Concept

There is little doubt that the public sphere is an important framework to understand the role of what can loosely be termed public opinion in the effective functioning of a democracy. Yet it is imperfect. Indeed, the public sphere is a concept that by necessity faces forces of evolution, from the rise of democratic institutions as feudal and religious controls diminished to the rise of networked communications and social media as traditional control over public communication by government and corporate media have diminished.

The bourgeois bias held by Habermas is evident. His work on the public sphere suggested that all citizens are welcome and that each individual's view was equal, something that does not easily reconcile with social realities then or now. Dahlberg (2014) notes that the concept of the public sphere "has come under extensive critique from a variety of theoretical and political positions ranging from rational choice theory to communitarianism to postmodernism." (p. 21) The idea that all citizens have equal access to the public sphere is at best wishful thinking. Nancy Fraser (1990) takes Habermas to task for suggesting that all citizens have full accessibility to the public sphere, noting that women, "plebian men" and minorities were excluded from an equal contribution to the public sphere. According to Fraser, "this public sphere was to be an arena in which interlocutors would set aside such characteristics as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers." (p. 63) This would be an idealized vision of a democratic society, one not often found in reality where gender, race, sexuality and socio-economic status all play a role in determining an individual's share of voice within the public sphere. Sue Curry Jansen (2002) agrees with Fraser that the critiques of Habermas speak to the "liberal bias of his approach to democracy and the state; and his gendered blindspots." (p. 47)

Habermas himself would agree that the public sphere is by necessity in evolution. In his view, the public sphere is not a static construct; rather it is a concept that consumer capitalism has significantly influenced in the

20th century. This evolution has resulted in a blurring of the separation between the private and the public and the state and civil society (Habermas, 1991).

Habermas understood the impact of corporatized media, writing in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (1991), "Editorial opinions recede behind information from press agencies and reports from correspondents; critical debate disappears behind the veil of internal decisions concerning the selection and presentation of the material." (p. 169) This trend that Habermas identified decades ago has only accelerated. Now six companies (Comcast, Walt Disney, News Corporation, Time Warner, Viacom, CBS Corporation) own the bulk of television networks, radio stations and film production companies that produce the news and entertainment that most people in the United States consume in a regular day according to research done by the Columbia Journalism Review (2016). The situation is no better in Canada. "Diversity of media ownership is literally non-existent in Canada," wrote Paul Fontaine (2013) on the Canadian media web site J-Source. Bell Canada, Chorus Entertainment, Rogers Communications and Quebecor own most of the privately held media in the country. In New Brunswick, for example, all three English language daily newspapers, and most of the community weekly newspapers, are owned by JD Irving Limited, a branch of the powerful Irving family.

While the volume of content has exploded, this has been matched by the continuing decline in critical debate. News media has devolved into a sea of coverage most often defined by triviality and personality. Call it the Kardashian effect or maybe, as of this writing, the Trump effect. According to a Gallup poll, Americans trust in media has dropped from 55 per cent in 1999 to 40 per cent in 2015 (Gallup, 2015).

Noam Chomsky has identified that corporate media has done little to effectively speak "truth to power" as journalists relentlessly laud themselves for doing.

If the media were honest, they would say, 'Look, here are the interests we represent and this is the framework within which we look at things. This is our set of beliefs and commitments...I don't try to hide my commitments, and the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* shouldn't do it either. However, they must do it, because this mask of balance and objectivity is a crucial part of the propaganda function. In fact, they actually go beyond that. They try to present themselves as adversarial to power, as subversive, digging away at powerful institutions and undermining them. (1993)

While the media is part of the public sphere as Habermas describes it, Chomsky's point is well taken. We see from declining levels of trust and a corresponding increase in cynicism that corporate media have in some measure failed in their responsibility of representing public opinion formed in the public sphere. This creates further tension and strain and leads us directly to the impact of the rise of the Internet and networked digital communications technologies.

The Internet, Social Media and the Public Sphere

Yet even as the mainstream media loses its dominance in constructively shaping the conversation in the public sphere through a focus on "infotainment" and a corresponding decline in trust (Gallup, 2015), new ways for people to receive and share information have emerged with the rise of the "social web" and other networked technologies. In a remarkably brief period of time, these channels have become important players in how people in Western countries and beyond participate in the public sphere.

According to a Pew Research study (2015), 65 per cent of Americans now use at least one social network, up from 7 per cent in 2005 when social media was in its infancy. Globally, Facebook shows no signs of slowing its

extraordinary growth. As of March 31, 2016, the company says that it has 1.65 billion monthly active users. Of those, 1.09 billion use the site daily, and 989 million use the site daily on a mobile device. In Canada, a poll by Forum Research (2015) found that 59 per cent of Canadians use Facebook, and visit the site, on average, about nine times per week.

In barely one decade, social media has become foundational to the sharing of information in society. As such, the rise of the Internet and digitally mediated communications has transformed the opportunities individuals have to participate in the public sphere. As early as 2004, before the emergence of social media, James Bohman wrote that, “we still lack a clear understanding of how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication might contribute to a *new* kind of public sphere and thus to a new form of democracy.” (2004, p. 131)

A dozen years later, our understanding of how the web and social media contribute to the public sphere is no clearer. Indeed the relentless arrival of new social media networks used in new ways makes our understanding ever more problematic. We are able to communicate and engage much more easily now and in some cases take action to influence the behavior of those directed by the public sphere. Clay Shirky (2011) notes that as our communications landscape gets “denser, more complex, and more participatory” (p. 28) as new opportunities arise to gain access to information and engage in public speech. That creates opportunities for people within the public sphere to “undertake collective action” (p. 28). Yochai Benkler (2006) also notes that digital technology within a networked public sphere creates new opportunities for individuals to engage in public debate, writing that it “allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in the conversation.” (p. 213)

The thinking of Bohman, Shirky and Benkler is borne out in a study published by Pew Research Center on “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age” (2013). It found that nearly 75 percent of 18-24 year olds engaged in some sort of political activity on social networks in the 12 months preceding the survey.

As the report notes, “Indeed, the youngest American adults are more likely to engage in political behaviors on social networking sites than in any other venue.” (p. 5) That provokes an interesting question – without social network sites, what percentage of these people would still become politically active?

One of the defining characteristics of Web 2.0 is the ability of communities of interest to be built around an issue, irrespective of geography. In some ways, this further fragments the idea of the public sphere. As Boham (2004) notes “the Internet and other contemporary public spaces permit a form of publicity that results in a public of publics rather than a unified public sphere based in a common culture or identity” (p. 152). Tatiana Mazali (2011) echoes this, writing that, “Social network sites have provided online communities with a new organizational framework. Early public online communities (and current websites dedicated to communities of interest) were structured by topic or according to topical hierarchies. Social network sites, however, are structured with the individual at the center of their own community and networks.” (p. 291)

More people engaging actively in public discourse from around the world, not constrained by traditional limits of influence, create an entirely new paradigm in our conceptualization of the public sphere. Terje Rasmussen (2014) writes that the emergency of technology mediated communication, “makes the notion of a public sphere extremely complex. It is more important than ever to examine the interrelationship between face-to-face publics, Internet-based publics and mass mediated publics – and the capacity of this hybrid public sphere to influence formal politics.” (p. 1327) Boham (2004) anticipated Rasmussen’s point a decade earlier, when he noted that, “the space opened up by computer-mediated communication supports a new sort of ‘distributive’ rather than unified public sphere with new forms of interaction.” (p. 139)

Still the ability to engage in public debate, such as with the Occupy movement, does not inherently correlate with changes to policy or action by institutions. West (2013) found that “[T]he ability of the new electronic media to transform those movements into lasting social change, or to use the new media

as a public sphere whose discourse must be reckoned with, is not yet evident.” (p. 158). From this we can take that on some occasions, a social media frenzy on an issue can be little more than, as Shakespeare famously said, “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Indeed there are those, like Christian Fuchs, who believe that increased access to the public sphere address its limitations and improves the functioning of democracy. Fuchs (2014) argues that in effect the opposite may be happening:

In Habermas’ terms, we can say that social media has a potential to be a public sphere and lifeworld of communicative action, but that this sphere is limited by the steering media of political power and money so that corporations own and control and the state monitors users’ data on social media. Contemporary social media as a whole do not form a public sphere, but are in a particularistic manner controlled by corporations and the state that colonise and thereby destroy the public sphere potentials of social media. The antagonistic reality of social media challenges classical liberalism’s major assumptions. (p. 33)

While the most commonly used social media networks are owned by large, publicly traded corporations, in many cases those corporations have argued for increased transparency and personal privacy, often against the wishes of western governments who want more access to personal data. This trend is illustrated by Apple’s refusal to “unlock” the encryption on an iPhone used by domestic terrorists during an attack in San Bernadino, California fearing that would put the privacy of all iPhone users at risk. This stance was supported by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (Wired, 2016). So we are left grappling with the idea that large, profit-seeking companies are fighting for civil liberties, rather than governments elected to represent the interests of the people.

The Rise of Anonymous

According to McGill University's Gabriella Coleman (2014), the group Anonymous, a loosely affiliated collective, evolved from people seeking "lulz" (i.e. enjoyment at other people's misfortune) who were "provocateurs and saboteurs who dismantle convention while occupying a liminal zone" (loc. 517). Coleman also notes that the actions of Anonymous are "sometimes peaceful and legal, sometimes disruptive and illicit, often existing in a moral and legal gray area." (loc. 517) It's complicated, as the popular saying goes.

Christian Fuchs (2013) argues "Although Anonymous is pluralistic, we can see it as a collective, in which certain political worldviews co-exist, complement, and/or contradict each other, and are represented to varying degrees at different times." (P. 35)

The rise of Anonymous, and its amorphous and morally ambiguous nature, has naturally raised alarm in the United States. But as David Kushner (2014) notes, "Anonymous might be the most powerful nongovernmental hacking collective in the world. Even so, it has never demonstrated an ability or desire to damage any key elements of public infrastructure." Rosie Walsh concurs with this, writing in the U.K.'s *The Guardian* (2013), that Anonymous, "seem(s) to swing wildly from the pursuit of justice to the causing of chaos." We can conclude from all this that Anonymous is a wildly malleable organization, barely coordinated, leaderless yet not entirely rudderless. The "organization," if Anonymous is one, embraces the chaos and the relative anarchy of its structure.

When considering the role of Anonymous in the Rehtaeh Parsons' case, we are able to directly examine the communications from Anonymous including its tweets, press releases and videos. For example, its YouTube video (Anonymous, 2013a), which helped turn the Parsons' case into a global issue, is still viewable. It excoriates the authorities for their failings in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, and pledges to force them to lay charges against those men who assaulted her.



But how do we understand Anonymous as we seek to better understand the evolution of the public sphere? We need to dive deeper on this organization.

Chapter Two: Who Is Anonymous?

Anonymous is often described by mainstream media as a “hacker collective” (The Daily Beast, 2013). However, this attempt at categorization misses the mark in many ways. Dr. Gabrielle Coleman, a professor at McGill University, in her 2014 book *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* traces the history of Anonymous back to the website 4chan. That site’s “B” channel was a gathering place for anonymous users to post whatever they wanted – it allows almost any type of content to be posted, no matter how offensive. 4Chan is inherently anonymous – users are not able to register. It is also the most popular. By 2013, the site was receiving 22 million users on a monthly basis (Daily Dot, 2013.)

The result was often puerile, pornographic and offensive – anything for the lulz which Coleman (2014) defines as something “acquired most often at someone’s expense, prone to misfiring, and, occasionally, bordering on disturbing or hateful speech.” (p. 477) Most people just call it Internet trolling

While the adolescent nature of the lulz offsets the social commentary inherent in an Anonymous op, it does not discredit it entirely. The challenge with defining Anonymous is the distributed and leaderless nature of the movement. As Coleman notes, there is no central authority, no chain of command, no organizational chart to assign responsibility or blame. As Coleman also notes (2013) “[S]ome ‘Anons’ work independently, while others work in small teams or join a swarm of demonstrators during a large-scale campaign.” (p. 3) She further notes that, “Anonymous tends to ride and amplify the wave of existing events or causes. Even if it magnifies and extends the scope of an event — sometimes so significantly as to alter its nature or significance — the campaign eventually ends as the wave hits the shore.” (p. 3)

The political underpinning of Anonymous is equally abstruse. Good (2015) argues that Anonymous emerged from what he terms a “prepolitical” subculture to evolve into a group with an agenda to take part in “battles against powerful and corrupt governmental, corporate, and religious interests.” (p. 77) But the politics of

Anonymous are hardly cohesive. It pulls together a various strands of political ideology that are different, if not occasionally contradictory. Its proponents can still reside comfortably within Anonymous given its core principles and evolving function. Fuchs (2013) notes that:

A specific characteristic of Anonymous is that it is at the same time social movement and anti-movement; it is collective political action based on a shared identification with some basic values (such civil liberties and freedom of the Internet) that results in protest practices online and offline against adversaries, and at the same time for many of those engaging on Anonymous platforms individual play and entertainment. (p. 347)

Anonymous is not a collective in the traditional sense – that implies a much more clearly defined common cause. Anonymous is powerful, and potentially revolutionary, because it has almost no structure whatsoever. Anyone can become an Anon – all it requires is saying it. And anyone can start an op. All it needs is a few people to agree that the op is important or relevant and it exists.

That, of course, is the opposite of the traditional “command and control” structure found in most organizations, be they corporate, governmental or non-governmental. Someone generally has to be in charge with the executive leadership often vetted or overseen by a board of directors or advisors. Coleman (2013) writes that, “The number of relationships, fiefdoms and cliques in simultaneous existence is largely invisible to the public, which tends to see Anonymous from the vantage point of carefully sculpted propaganda and the media’s rather predictable gaze.” (p. 1655) The media, then, prefers a more tightly constructed narrative of Anonymous as a carefully organized group with a clear mission.

Trying to assign a cohesive political ideology to Anonymous is problematic. Goode (2015) concludes that, “The ethos of Anonymous is technophilic and digital technology is heralded not only as a way of life for group members but also as a driving force for reshaping society.” (p. 75). Columbia (2013) assigns Anonymous

and its supporters the title of “cyberlibertarians,” arguing that its core philosophy revolves around freedom for the individual to act without constraint as long as it does not constrain the freedom of others. Yet that techno-centric libertarian imperative often creates strange political bedfellows. He argues that:

Cyberlibertarianism solicits anticapitalist (or at least anti-neoliberal) impulses and recruits them for capitalist purposes, to such a degree that many believers often do not notice and even disclaim these foundations, although they are typically unable to offer alternative grounding for their beliefs (p. 4-5).

Anonymous then creates a “big tent” that encompasses individuals of varying political beliefs who may share a love of technology and a suspicion of government, churches, business and other traditional institutions of power that tend to limit the power of the individual.

The anarchic nature of the structure of Anonymous extends to its social media presence. Search the social media site Twitter for Anonymous and you will find dozens of accounts. The closest to an “official” account would be @YourAnonNews – and that aura of authenticity is largely the result of its large following of over 1 million people. The lack of structure and cohesion has flummoxed most observers. Los Angeles television station, and Fox News affiliate KTTV famously called Anonymous the “Internet Hate Machine” in a segment broadcast on July 26, 2007.

While media like Fox News preferred to classify Anonymous as hackers with no social purpose, the reality is more complicated. As Anonymous evolved from the adolescent lulz of 4chan, it began to morph, for some at least, into a more activist effort. By 2006, Coleman (2014) says that the name Anonymous was being used by trolls to provoke awareness on social issues. Supporters of Anonymous – known as “Anons” – would rally around an issue or controversy. The campaign against the controversial religion Scientology was Anonymous’ first major op. This effort was a mix of serious protests along with finding lulz through, for example,

faxing black pages to the Church of Scientology fax machines in order to drain their ink supply.

Anonymous' involvement in the Rehtaeh Parsons' case was not the group's first involvement in an issue of that type. As David Kushner (2013a) recounts in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Anonymous had become part of a rape case in Steubenville, Ohio, that captured media interest around the world and became a symbol in the burgeoning discussion over "rape culture."

That discussion focuses on the frequency of sexual assaults committed by men against women, and the reality that women are often blamed for these attacks. More than 30 years ago, Dianne Herman wrote that rape culture emerged due to "teaching males and females that it is natural and normal for sexual relations to involve aggressive behavior on the part of males" (1984, p. 52). Nearly three decades later, Suran (2014) argued that rape remains a systemic and collective problem, something that can no longer be considered a subculture of feminism. The "culture or societal explanation of rape" is due to the "prevailing heterosexual power hierarchy to which we have all been inured" (p. 277).

The response of Anonymous and others online is an example of the public response to rape culture, and how authorities and communities are currently dealing with it. As Rosie Swash (2014) wrote:

If sexual assault has a ghastly new pattern in the internet age – a girl is raped, someone whips out their phone to record it, the resulting pictures aren't treated as evidence of a crime but a tool with which to taunt the victim – then Anonymous's involvement is about more than a collective sense of public anger about these assaults, it could also represent a turning point in the way local communities and the authorities deal with rape allegations.

In the Steubenville case, a young woman was allegedly raped by members of the local football team, something of an institution in the community. While local police began an investigation, an online community of interest formed to call for

charges to be pressed against the other men there that evening that were thought to have watched and videotaped the assault. An Anonymous member from Kentucky picked up on the efforts of local bloggers to focus attention on the case. He helped hack the social media and email accounts of those thought to be involved, discovering and sharing a video of one man mocking the young woman being assaulted. Anonymous members also hacked the school's web site.

The Steubenville case became national news, but with it came the ugly reality of how complicated and morally questionable some of Anonymous' tactics can be. Innocent people were brought into the issue and many in positions of authority complained about "trial by Twitter." (Levy, 2013) Anonymous interrupted what had been considered due process, posing questions about the fairness of its operation (Kushner, 2013).

There are certainly varying perspectives when considering the work of Anonymous. For Coleman, "what began as a network of trolls has become, for the most part, a force for good in the world" (2013, Loc. 761). Not everyone agrees with this assessment of Anonymous. During the peak of the discussion about Rehtaeh Parsons, Canada's Globe & Mail newspaper published an editorial condemning Anonymous, stating that: "The actions of these masked vigilantes is dangerous, hypocritical and, ultimately, illegal in Canada." (Globe & Mail, 2013).

Clearly Anonymous doesn't allow for simple categorization. Yet its efforts in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons demonstrate the power it can wield.

Chapter Three: Anonymous and Rehtaeh Parsons

The power of Anonymous to influence the discussion in the public sphere and the actions of traditional institutions of power came into sharp focus in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, a young Halifax woman.

Despite the visual evidence of a sexual assault against Parsons appearing to contravene child pornography laws in Nova Scotia, and that the names of the young men who assaulted Parsons were known within the community, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Nova Scotia Crown Prosecutor did not pursue charges, suggesting there was not enough evidence to ensure a conviction.

Parsons' father Glenn Canning wrote on his website after his daughter's death, as quoted in the National Post: "How is it possible for someone to leave a digital trail like that yet the R.C.M.P. don't have evidence of a crime? What were they looking for if photos and bragging weren't enough?" (Cross & Visser, 2013).

The case was another example of rape culture in North America, with an intoxicated young woman assaulted by a group of young men, and with images of the attack shared amongst their social circle to further brutalize the woman. The case may have stopped there, except for Anonymous. (See a chronology of Anonymous' involvement in the matter below.) A group of Anonymous activists in Nova Scotia and elsewhere decided to become involved in the case to force government and law enforcement in Nova Scotia to bring the people who assaulted Parsons to justice.

In its first statement to the media (Anonymous, 2013b), the group claimed it "has confirmed the identities of two of the four alleged rapists. We are currently confirming a third and it is only a matter of time before the fourth is identified as well."

The statement further said:

Our demands are simple: We want the N.S. RCMP to take immediate legal action against the individuals in question. We encourage you to act fast. If

we were able to locate these boys within 2 hours, it will not be long before someone else finds them.

The names of the rapists will be kept until it is apparent you have no intention of providing justice to Rehtaeh's family. Please be aware that there are other groups of Anons also attempting to uncover this information and they may not wish to wait at all. Better act fast.

The threat of releasing the names and the claim that it had identified two of the attackers in only two hours generated significant social media and traditional media interest.

The Crown Prosecutor and RCMP re-opened the case, while denying that the efforts of Anonymous had anything to do with their decision. As Allison Cross wrote in a story posted on the *National Post* web site on (2013, April 12):

“I want to stress that the information didn’t come from an online source,” said RCMP spokesman Cpl. Scott McRae. “That’s important because we can’t accept reports through social media because how do we verify it? What do we do with it?”

Later in the same story Cpl. McRae added, “To put it mildly, there’s been a significant amount of interest in the file,” he said. “This is definitely a good thing.”

Nova Scotia police were unsettled by the global scrutiny put on the Rehtaeh Parsons case by Anonymous. A spokesperson for the Halifax Police Department, said, "It's concerning ... that people may be wanting to take any form of vigilante action. Opinions and rumours are being taken as a truth. Innocent people could be impacted." (The Guardian, 2014)

Yet despite the expressions of concern from prosecutors and police, Anonymous did not stop its efforts. It did however, address why it believed its efforts were needed to bring justice to Rehtaeh Parsons and her family.

In a press release (Anonymous, 2013d) posted on April 12, 2013, Anonymous stated that:

Why is Anonymous involved in this case? We are involved because the facts above clearly illustrate that several crimes have been committed in Nova Scotia. A 17-year-old girl killed herself because the police failed to do their jobs and charge a single person for any of them.

Is it necessary for Anonymous to be involved in this case? Yes. For a moment lets (sic) set aside the theatrics, the masks and the labels. We are group of concerned citizens that have recognized an injustice in the system. We have taken it upon ourselves to point out that injustice to the public and we are asking the police to correct their incompetent handling of this case--a young girl has already died from it.

Traditional power players like the Nova Scotia government, the police and the mainstream media evidenced a lack of understanding what Anonymous is, or why it rallied public opinion. It was easier to attempt to ignore it.

The "Independent Review of the Police and Prosecution Response to the Rehtaeh Parsons Case," conducted by Murray Segal and released publicly in October of 2015, is conspicuously silent about the role of Anonymous in reopening the Parsons case. There is not a single reference to Anonymous in the 145-page report.

Chronology

The following is the chronology of the death of Rehtaeh Parsons and the efforts of Anonymous to push the Government of Nova Scotia, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Halifax Police Department and Nova Scotia's Crown Prosecutors to take action against those it believed were involved:

April 7, 2013 – Rehtaeh Parsons is taken off life support and dies.

April 8, 2013 – "The justice system failed her," Leah Parsons, Rehtaeh's mother, wrote on her Facebook page.

April 9, 2013 – Chronicle Herald publishes "Who Failed Rehtaeh Parsons?"

April 9, 2013 – Anonymous begins communicating on the issue through the Twitter account @YourAnonNews, with over one million followers.

April 9, 2013 – Nova Scotia Justice Minister Ross Landry says he doesn't plan to order an independent review of the RCMP's handling of the Parsons' case. But later the same day he says the government will look for ways to review the RCMP investigation.

April 10, 2013 – Parsons' father Glenn Canning wrote on his website: “: “How is it possible for someone to leave a digital trail like that yet the R.C.M.P. don't have evidence of a crime? What were they looking for if photos and bragging weren't enough?”

April 10, 2013 - Anonymous issues a press release and video announcing the launch of #OpJustice4Rehtaeh. The press release claims they have identified two of the four alleged rapists. They demand that the RCMP “take immediate action against the individuals.” The statement further says “The names of the rapists will be kept until it is apparent you have no intention of providing justice to Rehtaeh's family.”

April 10, 2013 - @YourAnonNews tweets that it will withhold the names of the minors involved – “for now” – at the request of Leah Parsons, Rehtaeh's Mother.

April 11, 2013 – People fill a Halifax park to remember Parsons at a vigil and call for an end to violence against young women and girls.

April 11, 2013 – Anonymous issues a press release stating they know they identities of those they believe attacked Parsons, but also holds accountable the “school teachers, administrators, the police and prosecutors, and those who should have been role models in the late Rehtaeh's life.”

April 12, 2013 – The RCMP says it is reopening its investigation of the Parsons case after receiving new evidence, just hours after RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson expresses concerns about “vigilante justice” following the teenager's death.

April 14, 2013 – Anonymous organizes a #OpJustice4Rehtaeh protest in front of the Halifax Police Department headquarters.

April 15, 2013 – Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter says the province will launch an independent review of the RCMP's original investigation of allegations made by Parsons.

April 18, 2013 – Nova Scotia appoints two experts to review how the Halifax Regional School Board, the Capital District Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre responded to the Parsons case.

April 24, 2013 – Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets with members of Parsons' family in Ottawa and in question period says it is time to speak out against the notion some people have that anything goes on the Internet. Harper says his government will fast-track efforts to create an anti-cyberbullying law.

July 24, 2013 – Anonymous releases the names of the men it alleges assaulted Rehtaeh Parsons. In its statement it says "Nothing has happened yet, no charges were laid, no communication with the public and all the 4 accused involved are still running free."

September 21, 2014 – One of the people identified by Anonymous pleads guilty to child pornography charges.

November 24, 2014 – A second man identified by Anonymous pleads guilty to distributing child pornography.

October 8, 2015 – "Independent Review of the Police and Prosecutor Response to the Rehtaeh Parsons Case" is released. It concludes that there were errors in law made by the Crown Prosecutor who first reviewed the case who failed to consider other charges that could have been laid.

December 11, 2015 – The Nova Scotia Supreme Court ruled that The Cyber-Safety Act, which was put into place following the Rehtaeh Parsons case to protect people from online harassment, violates the free-speech clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The sad story of Rehtaeh Parsons drew global interest in part as a result of the role of Anonymous. It attempted to leveraged social media to force the hand of police and the courts – but who did it reach, and to what effect?

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

The goal of the research effort is to better understand the influence of Anonymous in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, and what that influence means in our understanding of the contemporary public sphere.

In exploring the reach of Anonymous and those who are influenced by the efforts, I have used a mixed methods approach to analysis. This allows for quantitative measures – in this case, the number of tweets and the audience those tweets reached – as well as a qualitative analysis of the intent and messages contained in the communication, and how they relate the changes in the dynamic of our concept of the public sphere.

Creswell and Plano Clark, as quoted in Creswell (2009) write that mixed methods research “involves philosophical assumptions.” They further state that “(I)t is more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research.” (p. 5)

As Joanna Sale, Lynne Lohfeld and Kevin Brazil conclude (2002):

Quantitative researchers perceive truth as something which describes an objective reality, separate from the observer and waiting to be discovered. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the changing nature of reality created through people’s experiences – an evolving reality in which the researcher and researched are mutually interactive and inseparable. (p. 50)

The analysis of the role of Anonymous in the public sphere as it relates to the case of Rehtaeh Parsons relies on a branch of qualitative research known as Qualitative Content Analysis, often shortened to QCA. This method allows for a more fulsome exploration of the online dialogue related to Anonymous and the

Rehtaeh Parsons' case that goes beyond the data gathered from a Quantitative Content Analysis.

Qualitative Content Analysis was selected for one element of the research approach due in large part to the limitations of currently available methods to quantitatively measure online discussions, particularly in social media channels like Twitter. While existing methods and technology can capture keyword or identify entities, it generally puts posts into imprecise binary categories of either "positive," "negative" or "neutral." That only tells part of the story.

As Sarah Kessler notes in *Fast Company* (2014, November 15): "But while measuring the sentiment in a sample of social media posts was once all most social analytics companies offered, it's since become apparent that extracting meaningful information from social networks is more complicated than that."

Keywords clearly do not correlate to sentiment, and quantitative analysis struggles to capture the nuances of human language, particularly sarcasm, colloquialisms and regional dialects. That makes solely quantitative data suspect as a tool to better understand the nuances of online conversation and, in this case, the role, reach and influence of Anonymous.

Qualitative Content Analysis better allows us to analyze the role of Anonymous in furthering, or even directing, the online and offline conversation about justice being served in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons.

Margaret Schreier (2012) writes that QCA is "a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of categories of a coding scheme." (p. 1) She further writes that, "Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding scheme." (p. 1)

The nature of data generated by online discussions in a platform like Twitter does not allow for effective quantitative analysis, at the moment at least, or until improved Natural Language Processing methods are developed that can better capture and interpret the vagaries of human language and the cultural

shorthand of online language. How, for example, can an algorithm today effectively capture the meaning behind a sarcastically offered emoji?

That means data requires a degree of interpretation to understand its meaning and context. Schreier (2012) notes that QCA “is interpretative in that it is applied to symbolic material that requires interpretation and in focusing on personal or social meaning.” (p. 35)

The question this research is attempting to answer is how social media sites like Twitter are reinvigorating the concept of the public sphere while addressing the problems many find inherent in the Habermas conceptualization. Does a platform like Twitter give a non-governmental group like Anonymous increased power and influence that leads to a reordering of the power dynamic within the public sphere? Or is it something much less positive, merely a platform for vigilante justice that further erodes the Western ideal of civil society?

To answer these questions, the research must go beyond the quantitative numbers to probe the meaning and influence behind them. Schreier describes using categorization to aggregate and synthesize data to uncover themes in representation. From Schreier (2012) we can conclude that Qualitative Content Analysis is a flexible approach to research, one that allows researchers to create a coding scheme unique to each set of data to assess and interpret the data.

Coding @YourAnonNews Tweets

Schreier calls for a coding frame to undertake a QCA. The coding frame includes the main categories or “dimensions” that are the primary aspects to focus the analysis in order to answer the research questions. To considering the role of Anonymous in an enhanced understanding of the evolution of the public sphere, I will focus on its use of Twitter during the peak period it was involved in the Rehtaeh Parsons’ case.

From April 9 to April 14 inclusive, 2013, Anonymous, through its primary Twitter account @YourAnonNews, posted 102 tweets related to the case of Rehtaeh Parsons and its #OpJustice4Rehtaeh.

Again, this account has a following of over 1 million people. Each of these Tweets was examined to categorize them in one of the above dimensions in the coding frame as part of the Qualitative Content Analysis. In addition, the number of “retweets” and “likes” generated by the 102 tweets was reviewed and tallied.

After a detailed preliminary review, it was concluded that the coding of tweets from @YourAnonNews during the time period of analysis falls into five distinct dimensions:

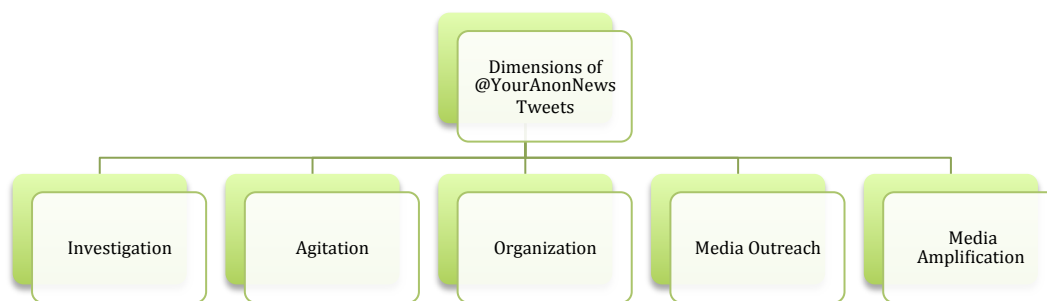


Figure 1: Dimensions of @YourAnonNews Tweets

1. **Investigation** – Direct solicitation of information from followers or others online to advance their investigation.
2. **Agitation** – Taunting or threatening legal, police and elected officials. This includes trying to force behaviors at the threat of releasing information to the public.
3. **Organization** – Calling on others to take part by directly contacting official players in the issue or by encouraging signing of petitions or taking part in protest rallies or other forms of IRL (“In Real Life”) protest.

4. **Media Outreach** – Using social media (Twitter and YouTube) to publicize their media statements, and fuel media coverage of their operations.
5. **Amplification of Media** – Sharing media coverage of Anonymous’ role in the Rehtaeh Parsons case, both fueling its own perceived role in the issue and extending the reach of media coverage of the narrative it is creating.

Validity of Research

The validity of qualitative research is often debated. While it lacks the statistical rigor of a valid quantitative research, a qualitative study does offer the potential of a more nuanced understanding of an issue.

Tracy (2010) offers a model for qualitative research that includes eight universal hallmarks to ensure reliability. This type of criteria is important, writes Tracy, as they “serve as helpful pedagogical launching pads across a variety of interpretive arts.” (p. 838). She further says that it is possible to “create a parsimonious set of universal criteria for qualitative quality that still attends to the complexity of the qualitative landscape.” (p. 839)

Tracy identifies eight criteria for assessing quality in qualitative research. The following matches those criteria with the review and coding of the tweets from @YourAnonNews:

| Criteria for Quality | How It is Achieved In This Research |
|----------------------|---|
| Worthy Topic | The study of Anonymous and its role within the public sphere is relevant, timely, significant and interesting. As a group, Anonymous continues to advocate on issues and is generating meaningful influence on, at a minimum, raising awareness. Little data-driven academic research has been done on Anonymous to date. |
| Rich Rigor | There is rigor to the study of these tweets as it measures the moment in time this issue was most |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| | prevalent in society, it includes all the tweets posted by Anonymous at that time and within the proper context, and the data is coded in appropriate dimensions. |
| Sincerity | There is transparency and self-reflexivity about values and biases. The research effort begins with no desired outcome, rather develops the coding only after review of the data. The tweets are publicly available and the coding dimensions can be easily considered. |
| Credibility | The data and conclusions are plausible and trustworthy. By reviewing and illustrating the source data, the conclusions 'show rather than tell.' |
| Resonance | The coding and conclusions create resonance that illustrates the role of a group like Anonymous. It also offers naturalist generalization allowing readers to make, as Tracy writes, "choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene, rather than feel as though the research report is instructing them what to do" (P. 845). |
| Significant Contribution | The research makes a significant contribution in a practical consideration of the relative influence of a group like Anonymous within the public sphere, and how a platform like Twitters gives voice to new actors. |
| Ethical | The data and conclusions raise the uneasy reality of a group like Anonymous, and the reality that its efforts fall outside our normative conceptualization of law enforcement and justice. |
| Meaningful Coherence | The qualitative research has meaningful coherence in that it achieves its goal of understanding the influence of Anonymous in the public sphere by examining the group's efforts in the Rehtaeh Parsons case and addressing how that relates to a new or reordered power dynamic in our traditional conceptualization about the public sphere. |

From "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. (Tracy, 2010)

Quantitative Analysis

The Qualitative Content Analysis data helps address the role Anonymous is playing within the contemporary public sphere. The coding of the QCA tells us the dimension of the communication from Anonymous – how it is engaging within the public sphere and the social, legal and political results it is attempting to achieve.

The second part of the mixed methods research is a quantitative review of those following @YourAnonNews to understand the nature of the communities engaged with and influenced by Anonymous.

An analysis of a large representative sample of that following using technology offered by the company Affinio produces some unexpected results. Affinio is a data analysis company whose proprietary algorithm analyzes account followings on Twitter and other social media channels. It assesses who follows an account and how they share similar interests or views. Based on these shared interests, determined in part by an analysis of other accounts they follow, Affinio groups a following into discreet segments or “tribes.”

Importantly, Affinio’s platform goes beyond the sentiment analysis found in other online measurement tools, which as noted earlier, is of limited analytical value. Those measurement tools capture and analyze only those that post content on a social network, while in reality this only accounts for a minority of people on Twitter, as a significant portion are “lurkers” – those reading and following links but seldom posting their own content.

As Marc Smith, Lee Rainie, Ben Shneiderman and Itai Himelboim note in a Pew Research Report (2014), it is important to recognize that Twitter is its own community and not one that is inherently reflective of the broader population. Its users are only 18 per cent of Internet users and 14 per cent of the overall adult population.

Furthermore, not every Twitter user is equal in reach or influence, and communities of interest form within those who follow an organization like Anonymous. Smith et al write:

Each person who contributes to a Twitter conversation is located in a specific position in the web of relationships among all participants in the conversation. Some people occupy rare positions in the network that suggest that they have special importance and power in the conversation. (p. 2)

While Twitter use is not ubiquitous in North America, its influence can be considered outsized when it comes to shaping public opinion. For many of its 300 million users, Twitter is the first stop when learning more about a news issue. It is also used heavily by traditional media journalists.

An analysis using the Affinio research platform was done for the time period January 18, 2016 to February 17, 2016. It reviewed the identity and relationships of 198,145 public Twitter accounts of followers of @YourAnonNews in Canada and the United States. The data this produced indicates that those following @YourAnonNews represent a more diverse audience than might have been expected. While not surprisingly there are strong segments of people with progressive political views, mainstream media professionals and those involved in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, there are many others.

The data segmenting the community of interest built around the work of Anonymous is further reinforced by the work of Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014) who identified six distinct types of “conversational archetypes” that are found on Twitter (p. 2–4):

1. **Polarized crowd:** two big and dense groups reflective of divisive political issues.
2. **Tight crowd:** highly interconnected people with few isolated participants, reflective of a narrow community of interest.
3. **Brand clusters:** large groups of disconnected participants who tweet about a brand or celebrity but not to each other.

4. **Community Clusters:** multiple smaller groups, which often form around a few hubs, each with its own audience, influencers, and sources of information.
5. **Broadcast Network:** a distinctive hub and spoke structure in which many people repeat what prominent news and media organizations tweet.
6. **Support Network:** Customer complaints handled by a Twitter service account produces a hub-and-spoke structure. The hub gets replied to or retweeted by many disconnected people, creating inward spokes.

The data captured using Affinio to segment those who follow @YourAnonNews falls into the “Community Cluster” archetype as described by Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014), although Affinio uses the “tribe” terminology to define the communities within the following.

Validity of Research

The data collected through Affinio and the conclusions that are drawn from it can be judged valid in a number of ways.

First, the statistical sample, with N=198,145 public Twitter users, is robust. This sample represents about 20 per cent of the total number of people following @YourAnonNews at the time of sampling. Secondly, the data from Affinio goes deeper than other quantitative online measures to assess the relationships and affinities of those who “lurk” rather than post. In this case, nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of followers are lurkers who post tweets infrequently or not at all. Thirdly, the data is geographically representative from across North America, highlighting areas of geographic density of followers, which is in itself another important analytical consideration. Finally, the data comfortably matches existing characterizations of archetypal communities on Twitter, as described by Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014).

As we will see, the data collected through Affinio and resulting analysis paints a picture of widely distributed audience who are choosing to become part of the Anonymous community in some form, helping us better understand the

role an organization like this can play in our evolving understanding of the public sphere.

Chapter Five: Research Findings

Anonymous Amplifies Rehtaeh Parsons Conversation

The sad story of Rehtaeh Parsons went from a local issue in Halifax, Nova Scotia to North American or even global one in a matter of days, fuelled in part by the role of Anonymous.

From April 9 to April 14 inclusive, 2013, Anonymous, through its primary Twitter account @YourAnonNews, posted 102 tweets related to the case. Again, this account has a following of over 1 million people.

While reaching 1 million people on an issue is an impressive result in its own right, the impact of Anonymous in the “Twittersphere” is much larger than that. The Qualitative Content Analysis found that those 102 Tweets generated a total of 10,492 retweets, meaning that the issues, and the outrage sparked in part by Anonymous was amplified to a much wider audience. The @YourAnonNews tweets during that time period also generated 3259 likes.

Coding of Results

The review of the 102 Tweets assigned each to one of five categories: 1) Investigation, 2) Agitation, 3) Organization, 4) Media Outreach and 5) Media Amplification. Based on a review of these tweets with these dimensions in mind, the result is:

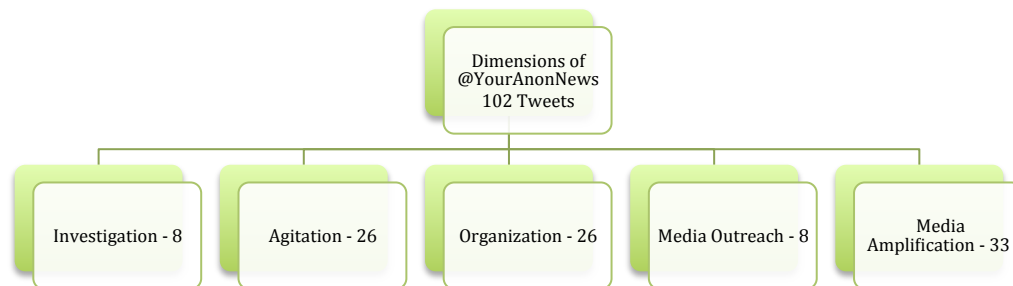





Figure 2: Tweets from @YourAnonNews April 9 to April 14

The first tweets were links to mainstream media coverage of the issue (media amplification), posted on April 9.

 **Anonymous** @YourAnonNews · 9 Apr 2013
Yes. Some people are sick. RT @SirBrixALot: @YourAnonNews do you really think they would put the photo out if they "raped" her?


← ↻ 12 ❤️ 6 📧 ⋮

 **Anonymous** @YourAnonNews · 9 Apr 2013
Rehtaeh Parsons suicide: Mother says teenager was raped, bullied | natpo.st/11PdQ9H



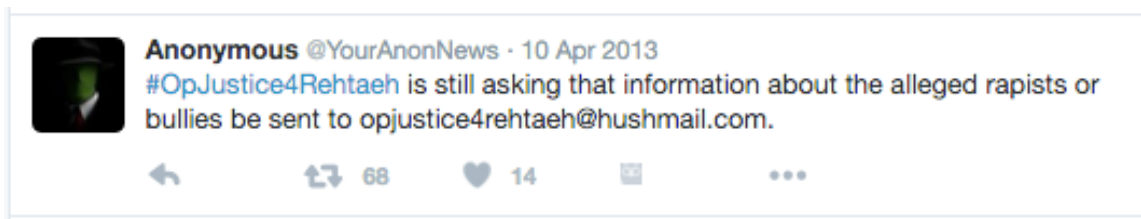
'The justice system failed her': Nova Scotia teenager commits suicide...
The mother of a 17-year-old Halifax girl who committed suicide says her daughter was raped by four boys two years ago and viciously bullied after...
news.nationalpost.com

← ↻ 81 ❤️ 9 📧 ⋮

 **Anonymous** @YourAnonNews · 9 Apr 2013
Nova Scotia Teen Commits Suicide After Rape, Bullying | gaw.kr/11PdwrB

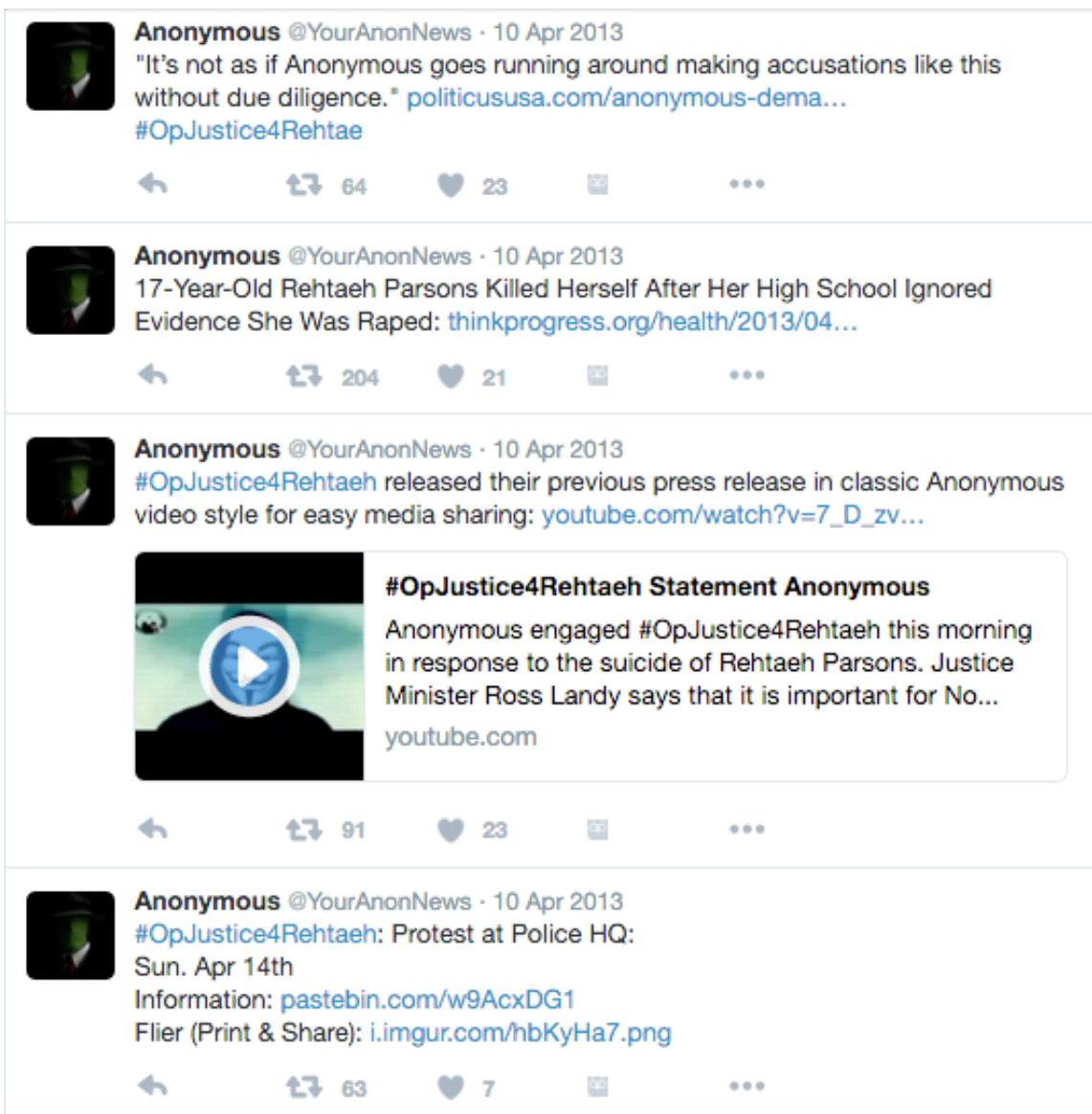
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By the next day, Anonymous had launched what it was calling, in its own particular vernacular, #OpJustice4Rehtaeh, seeking information from the public on the people who attacked Parsons or shared the photos of the assault. They asked their audience to send information to a dedicated “hushmail” email account. This is an example of the tweets coded as Investigation.



Later that day, Anonymous issued its first statement (in text and video form on YouTube) announcing its plans to force police and Crown Prosecutors to pursue charges. This is the type of Tweet coded as Media Outreach.

Anonymous also announced a plan to hold a protest later that week in front of the main Halifax Police Department building. This is an example of Organization.



The following image was shared online, another example of Organization, with this one moving from the online world into the real world:

OPERATION JUSTICE FOR REHTAEH



A PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION WILL BE HELD IN FRONT OF POLICE HEADQUARTERS TO DEMAND JUSTICE FOR THE PARSONS' FAMILY FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF THEIR 17-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER REHTAEH. PROTESTERS ARE GATHERING WITH TWO DEMANDS:

1) THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE WILL CONTINUE THEIR INVESTIGATION INTO THE RAPE OF REHTAEH PARSONS.

2) JUSTICE MINISTER ROSS LANDRY WILL OPEN A THOROUGH AND TRANSPARENT INVESTIGATION INTO WHY REHTAEH'S CASE WAS SUMMARILY DISMISSED BY THE RCMP.

ANONYMOUS IS CONTINUING TO GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING REHTAEH'S DEATH. WE ARE DETERMINED TO FIND JUSTICE FOR REHTAEH.

WHERE:
HALIFAX DISTRICT RCMP
1975 GOTTINGEN STREET
HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA
B3J 2H1

WHEN:
SUNDAY, APRIL 14TH (2PM ADT)

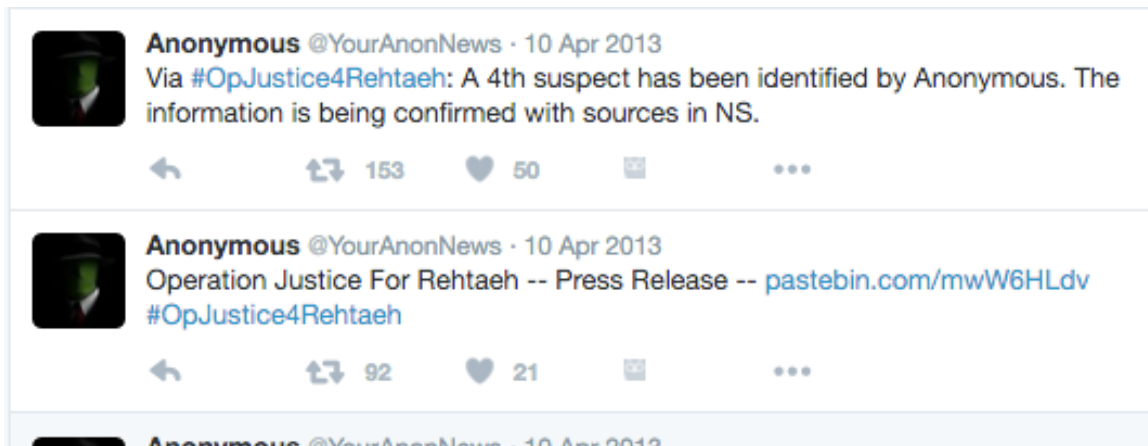
#HALIFAXDEMO



In the press release issued by Anonymous on April 10 (coded as Media Outreach) the group claims they have identified two of the four alleged rapists. They demand that the RCMP “take immediate action against the individuals.” Anonymous does not issue the names at this time, rather using the knowledge of the alleged perpetrators to force the legal system’s hand. “The names of the rapists will be kept until it is apparent you have no intention of providing justice to Rehtaeh's family.”

A hallmark of Anonymous’ agitation approach is encouraging its supporters to directly contact a political, legal or police official. In this case they asked people through twitter to call the Nova Scotia Minister of Justice Ross Landry directly to “Demand Action.” This is another example of Tweets coded as “Agitation.”





While police originally claimed that there was not enough evidence to charge anyone, in only a day into its #OpJustice4Rehtaeh effort Anonymous was able to claim to have “solved” the case in two hours. This is another example of “Investigation.”

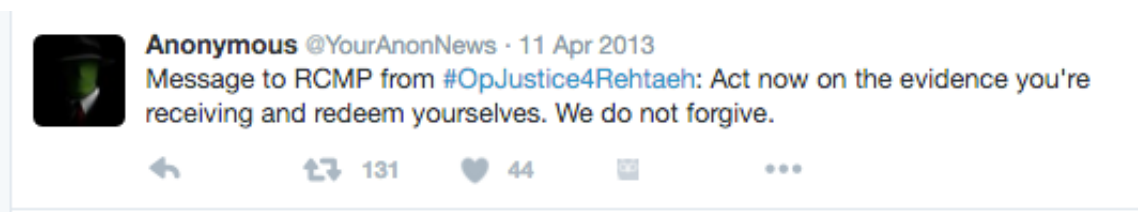
After only one day the traditional media begins to actively cover the efforts of Anonymous, which in turn Anonymous amplifies further by sharing the media stories on Twitter (coded as “Media Amplification”). We also see the number of retweets increasing with their posts.



On Thursday morning of that week (April 11), Anonymous issues a press release (“Media Outreach”) stating that while it knows the names of the attackers, responsibility must also be borne by the “school teachers, administrators, the police and prosecutors, and those who should have been role models in the late Rehtaeh’s life” (Anonymous, April 11).



That same day Anonymous further increases pressure on the RCMP, with this tweet (“Agitation”) shared by 131 other Twitter users:



The next day, April 12, the RCMP announces it is re-opening the investigation of the assault on Rehtaeh Parsons, saying it has received new evidence.



However, the tension between the RCMP and Anonymous is growing with the RCMP expressing concerns about “vigilante justice.” Anonymous’ response coded as “Agitation.”



On April 14, a crowd of over 100 people gathered in protest in front of police headquarters in Halifax as a result of a protest organized online by Anonymous.

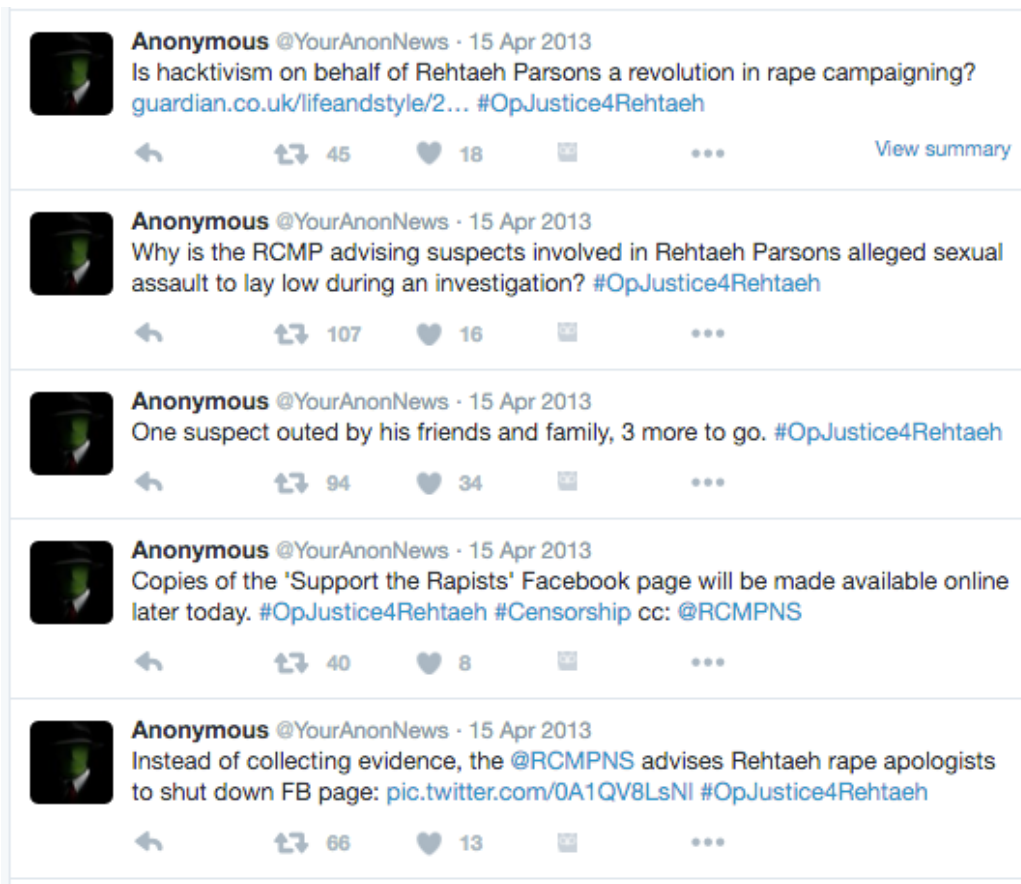


Anonymous also turned to an online petition to engage people in the cause (coded as “Organization”). The petition on the web site change.org to Nova Scotia Justice Minister Ross Landry was entitled “Justice for Rehtaeh: Demand an independent inquiry into the police investigation.” It received 464,700 signatures and was classified as “Confirmed victory” on the site (Change.org, 2016).



Anonymous' #OpJustice4Rehtaeh campaign created a conversation about rape culture and the role of groups outside the legal or political system. While some saw Anonymous as heroes – others saw them as vigilantes and as dangerous people operating outside the realm of the law.

The conflict inherent within this attracted the interest of media outlets, which Anonymous shared with its large following (“Media Amplification”).



Who Is Informed By Anonymous?

As noted earlier, the Twitter account @YourAnonNews is the closest thing to an official Twitter channel for the organization. It boasts over 1 million followers. Understanding who those followers are, and where they live, is vital to understanding the influence of Anonymous within the public sphere.

Importantly, Affinio's platform goes beyond the sentiment analysis found in other online measurement tools. They capture and analyze only those that post content, while in reality this only accounts for a minority of people on Twitter, as a significant portion are "lurkers" – reading and following links but seldom posting their own content.

The Affinio platform reviewed the identity and relationships of 198,145 public Twitter accounts of followers of @YourAnonNews in Canada and the United States. It found an average engagement of 18.93 tweets per month amongst these users, yet it also found that only 21.45 per cent were active

tweeters, while the remaining 78.55 per cent were “lurkers,” defined as users who tweeted less than 15 times per month.

Those findings illustrate what is perhaps a surprising diversity of those who follow @YourAnonNews. While there are strong segments of people with progressive political views, mainstream media professionals and those involved in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, there are many others.

As noted earlier the data captured using Affinio to segment the @YourAnonNews following falls into the “Community Cluster” archetype as described by Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014), although Affinio uses the “tribe” terminology to define the communities within the following.

Within the Community Cluster, Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014) conclude that, “Some information sources and subjects ignite multiple conversations, each cultivating its own audience and community” (p. 2). Within the following of @YourAnonNews this is an important consideration as “these can illustrate diverse angles on a subject based on its relevance to different audiences, revealing a diversity of opinion and perspective on a social media topic.” (p. 2)

The chart below indicates the “tribes” found within the following of @YourAnonNews. It shows the relative interconnectedness of the tribes, which illustrates the fact that there are clearly separate and distinct groups interested in the audience of Anonymous – something characteristic to the Community Cluster archetype as described by Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman and Himelboim (2014).

Of particular note in the following chart, we see diversity within these segments including a strong representation of “Sports Dads” and “Mom’s/Wives” as well as those with strong interest in gaming, wrestling and craft beer.

The Affinio data results also points to a perhaps surprising following of @YourAnonNews by those who are classified as conservative Christians and who share strong Libertarian views.

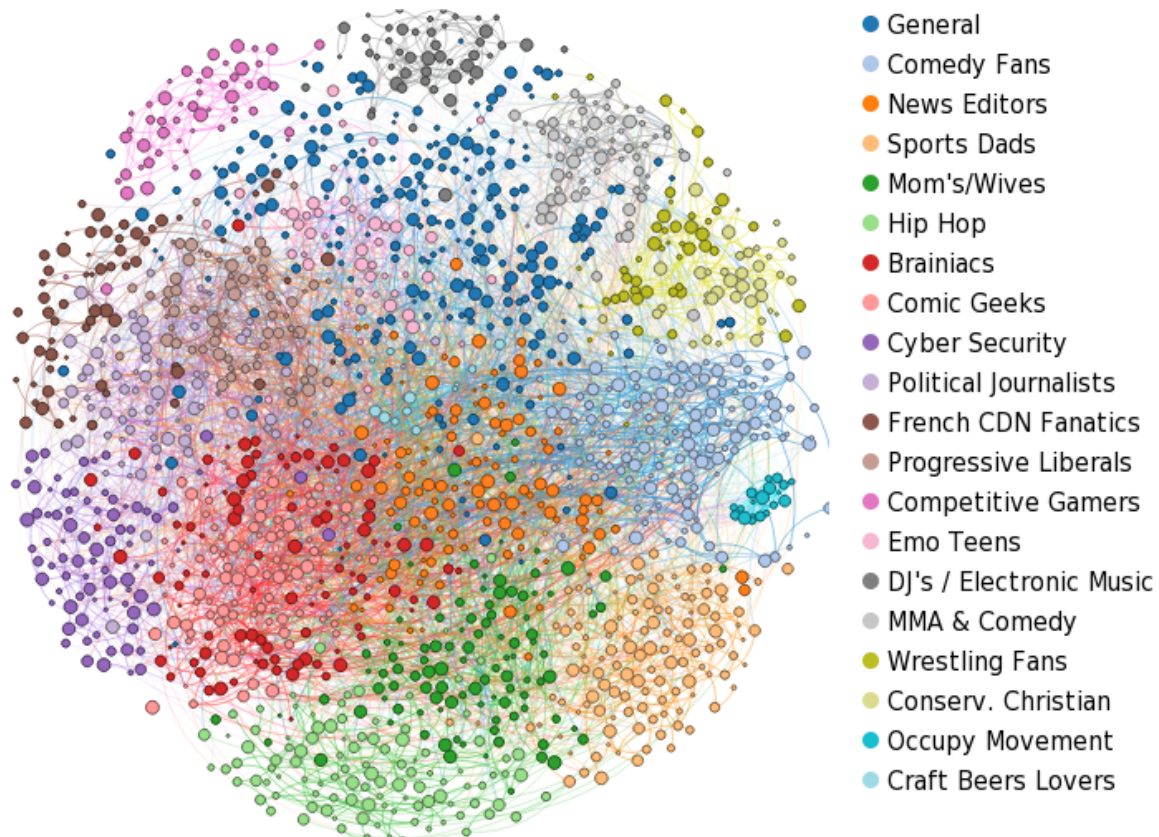


Figure 3: Tribes of followers of @YourAnonNews

The following chart is a “heat map” that illustrates the geographic density of followers of @YourAnonNews. Very clearly, we see that an interest in @YourAnonNews is strongest in the eastern seaboard of North America, including Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston and New York, and extending westward covering Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto in Canada, and into the Midwest United States including Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and Cincinnati. In the southern United States there is a stronger representation of followers around Austin, Texas (a city known to be more progressive than the rest of that state). There is a strong following on the West Coast of the United States, stretching from San Diego to Los Angeles to San Francisco, and in the Pacific Northwest including Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington and into Vancouver, British Columbia.

From this we can clearly see that the audience for @YourAnonNews is not distributed evenly or widely, rather it is concentrated largely in urban, coastal areas and in the northeast.

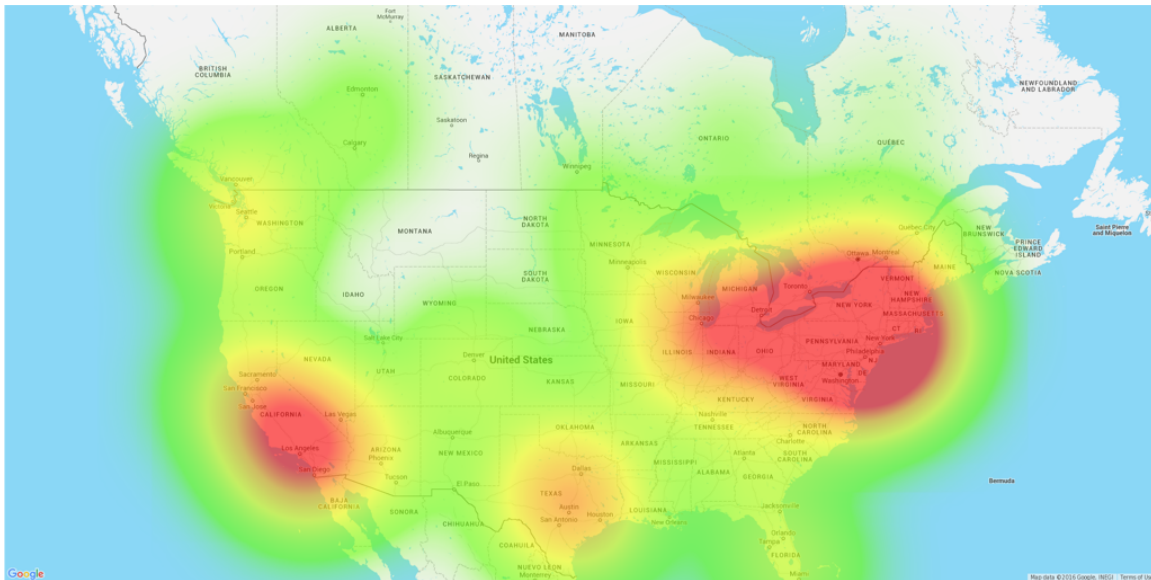


Figure 4: Heat Map of geographic density of @YourAnonNews followers in North America

The following word cloud captures the most used hashtags by those following @YourAnonNews. Obviously this is shaped greatly by what is happening in the culture during this time period, such as the National Football League's Super Bowl, and the Grammys, a music awards ceremony.

But backing out those hashtags, we see a preponderance of political topics, many related to the U.S. Democratic and Republican presidential nomination contest that was in full swing at the time.

Within this we see more use of hashtags related to Democratic contender Bernie Sanders (#FeelTheBern or #Bernie2016) than for his primary contender Hillary Clinton, or even for Donald Trump for that matter. We also see a strong representation of other political topics including #BlackLivesMatter, #Scalia (the at-that-point recently deceased U.S. Supreme Court Justice), #CdnPoli (for Canadian Politics), #FlintWaterCrisis and even #Anonymous.

Beyond the political, we see many hashtags that echo the broader distribution of the following, with many related to sports, video games, information security, and entertainment.



Figure 5: Top hashtags used by followers of @YourAnonNews in North America

When looking at media channels followed by those people who follow @YourAnonNews, we see that the top news source is @Wikileaks, coming in as the sixth most followed account overall and well ahead of other media channels like CNN, New York Times and others.

Overall we also see the presence of comedians with a political bent. The second most commonly followed account (after @YourAnonNews) is @StephenColbert, the late night TV host and former host of the mock right wing news show *The Colbert Report*. We see that satirical news site @TheOnion, TV host @ConanO'Brien, and @TheDailyShow are all in the top ten, and ahead of accounts like President Obama, media outlet *Vice*, and left-wing publication *Mother Jones*.

We also see that technology related issues are prevalent, with science advocate @NeilTysonDegraesse coming in as the third most followed, and @BillNye ("The Science Guy") and @NASA in the top 30 as well.

The most commonly used words in the Twitter biographies of those following @YourAnonNews also demonstrate the range of people who have chosen to follow this account and, if not support their agenda, at least add Anonymous to their social media stream as a source of information, news or

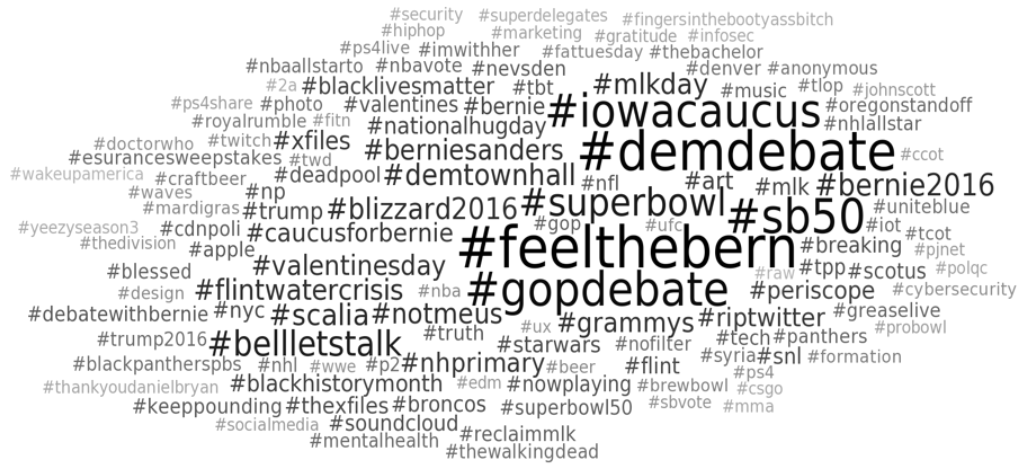


Figure 9: Word Cloud of most commonly used hashtags by "Brainiacs"

This data paints a picture of a largely well-educated, urban audience that is actively interested in progressive politics, yet who often work in more traditional job roles.

Conservative Christians

Somewhat unexpectedly, "Conservative Christians" emerge as a discrete group within the followers of @YourAnonNews. They account for two per cent of the followers sampled, with $n=4707$ for this segment. The density is higher in this group at .40 per cent, meaning the members of this group are more likely to follow each other than other segments.

This group is active on Twitter, averaging 23.43 tweets per month. They are most likely to describe themselves as conservatives, libertarian, Christian and American.

Geographically, as the heat map below for this segment illustrates, they are most likely to reside in Texas, New York, Florida, Washington and Atlanta. While New York is common across segments, the other geographic locations are more pronounced for Christian Conservatives.

Progressive Liberals

The progressive liberals segment represents about four per cent of the total audience analyzed with $n=8,498$.

This segment has a relatively high engagement level with an average of 33.37 tweets per month. This group's density stands at .25 percent. They are most likely to describe themselves as liberal, political, progressive or activist.

Geographically, as the following heat map indicates, they are most likely to live in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

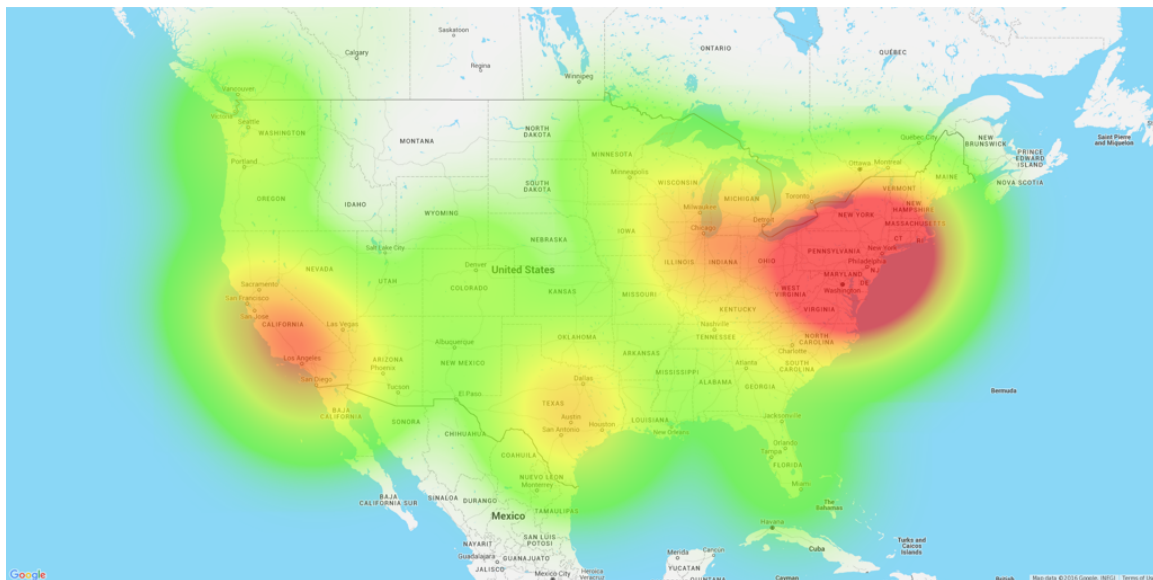


Figure 13: Heat Map of “Progressive Liberal” geographic density in North America

The word cloud of the most commonly used Twitter biography keywords illustrate a group of people who are aggressive in sharing their political views, with words like “liberal,” “progressive,” “activist,” and “justice” featuring prominently.

Occupy Movement

The Occupy Wall Street Movement, according to the University of Utah's Kevin Deluca, Sean Lawson and Ye Sun (2012), "started as a fundamental challenge to the status quo corporatacracy that controls the American political system through the form of free speech known as money." (p. 488)

The Occupy Movement used sit-in and other non-violent protests to oppose the rising levels of income inequality in the United States, and the economic challenges that beset many Americans following the 2008 economic collapse.

While it would seem that the Occupy Movement might share a similar anarchic worldview as those in the Anonymous movement, data indicates that those most active online in Occupy related conversations and content sharing represents a smaller audience within @YourAnonNews than Conservative Christians.

The Affinio data analysis determines that the Occupy Movement represents one per cent of the total audience, with n=2951.

However, this segment does differ from others who follow @YourAnonNews. The density level is much higher, coming in at 2.37 per cent, meaning that this group is more likely to follow each other than other tribes. They are also lower on the engagement scale, tweeting only an average of 8.64 tweets per month.

From a geographic perspective, we also see differences in this audience. They are most likely to be found in Oakland, California, Portland Oregon, North Carolina, New York and Colorado.

Chapter Six: Discussion of Research Findings

What The Data Shows: Role and Reception of Anonymous

As we consider the implications of this data, we must address it from two interrelated viewpoints: the nature and purpose of communication from Anonymous on Twitter, and the people who receive and act upon that communication.

Anonymous is about amplification of the signal, counting on its supporters to extend its reach online. We saw that in the 10,429 retweets of its message in less than a week in regard to Rehtaeh Parsons. That amplification is vital to considering Anonymous as an example of an extended and enhanced conceptualization of the public sphere. Anonymous is not a broadcaster in the way that traditional media tend to view the use of social media networks. For Anonymous, social media is a way to rally its community to take action to achieve a desired outcome or at least further a discussion. The interaction is two-way, as is the action.

The data from the mixed methods analysis of Anonymous contained herein illustrates that Anonymous, despite its loosely affiliated structure and lack of financial resources, can create renewed public discussion on an issue, and put pressure on traditional institutions of power – the legal system, police and politicians – to take action.

From the Qualitative Content Analysis we can conclude that Anonymous does play a role in changing the power dynamic within the public sphere. The issue of Anonymous' role in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons helps prove this. We also see a large portion of @YourAnonNews tweets dedicated to sharing media coverage of the issue, and perhaps more importantly, sharing covering of Anonymous' role in agitation on behalf of Rehtaeh Parsons. This traditional media are unable to resist the Guy Fawkes masks and provocative approach of these "hacktavists." The story is too alluring.

The public outcry over Rehtaeh Parsons began in the mass media. That fueled a sense of outrage among the public in a localized area (Nova Scotia) but the media

seldom gives that voice the power to change action – it merely reports on the outrage, but does little to advance it. Media coverage is fleeting, and rarely sustained. Without the role of Anonymous to galvanize its community online, there may never have been enough pressure brought to bear on the RCMP and provincial politicians to revive the case.

It is worth repeating that anyone can claim the mantle of Anonymous and begin a campaign of agitation on an issue. It only requires that enough people online agree that it is valid and to join in the cause in some way, as was done with Rehtaeh Parsons. Then momentum must build.

The rise of Anonymous would of course not be possible without the Internet and social media. A social network like Twitter evens the playing field. It is a democratizing force, giving Anonymous the same potential reach as traditional power brokers in the public sphere like the *New York Times* or the President of the United States. But that reach must be earned, through sophisticated leveraging of communications, as evidenced by the video versions of the group's press releases, and the extension of the message throughout the community of interest it creates.

Online activism is often derided as “slacktivism” or the mere pretense of activism. The case of Anonymous and Rehtaeh Parsons demonstrates that this isn't always true. The Qualitative Content Analysis shows that Anonymous used Twitter to actively engage with its community, finding information, using the threat of its potential release to attempt to force the hand of police, and furthering its own narrative through the extension of media coverage of its efforts.

As we consider whether Anonymous is a repudiation or reification of the public sphere, a deeper understanding of the diverse types of people following @YourAnonNews is informative. We see divergent groups of people with different worldviews opting to follow @YourAnonNews – this is a key point. People choose to follow accounts on Twitter from hundreds of millions of options. They build a personally customized filter to define the streams of information and perspective they seek.

Indeed, the Affinio data demonstrates that there is often little direct connection between the individuals that follow @YourAnonNews. That shows that

Anonymous has seeped into the public consciousness in a significant way, reaching people and engaging them in a conversation and creating a movement that would not be happening in any scale without the role played by Anonymous. It is creating communities of interest built around specific issues from disparate groupings of individuals.

Anonymous Within The Public Sphere

The data from the mixed methods research points to the work of Rasmussen (2014) who identified the “hybrid public sphere” and the growing complexity of the interactions between face-to-face publics, mass mediated publics and Internet-based publics.

Recall that Habermas (2009) identified media power as one of three types of power within the public sphere. That power, then at least, was held by mass media that played a vital role in defining the public agenda. But the strength of Anonymous, as Coleman (2013, 2) notes is publicity, it can therefore “create a PR nightmare for its targets” (P. 15). This give Anonymous tangible power to influence and manipulate the media, and the exploration of the @YourAnonNews tweets clearly shows the media appetite for this narrative. Of course, even if the media decide to not cover an Anonymous effort that can often have little consequence. Coleman notes information can be rapidly spread on social media without media involvement. This in turn has the effect of forcing the media to respond and provide coverage.

An enhanced public sphere is not limited to the online realm. It also translates into offline behavior that brings people out of the digital world and into the physical one through, for example, physical protests on the steps of the Halifax Police Department, as was seen in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons.

Social media and other networked communication vehicles by themselves carry no political or social agenda. It is how humans use these tools that create the issues (or opportunities). This research indicates that Anonymous is able to leverage social media and other networked technologies

to become a force within society. They assemble and influence a community of interest large enough to attract the interest of media and thus government and business.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand whether Anonymous is a repudiation or reification of the public sphere. Is it a positive step forward, or something that marks a troubling emergence of unaccountable forces of influence? Does it address the limitations inherent in Habermas' model?

The answer in one sense is simple – yes, Anonymous and the power of social networks does revive our view of the public sphere. It gives the potential of a stronger voice to those who may have been limited from meaningful participation. It also expands the ways in which individuals can gather to shape policy and society. Technology-mediated communication makes it possible for more people to become involved, for their efforts to be aggregated and amplified, and for their voices to be heard.

The strength of Anonymous is in fact what might be considered its weaknesses when considering the role of traditional non-state or mainstream media actors. While Anonymous does not have a leader to embody its mission or brand (like Julian Assange and Wikileaks), that in fact makes its role stronger within an enhanced understanding of the public sphere.

We can see that the growth of social networks allows for individuals to become more active in public debate. Barriers to participation – which may have historically been limited to taking part in poorly attended public meetings or writing letters to the editor at the local paper – are reduced as people now have a powerful vehicle for engagement in the form of a reasonably accessible smart phone. Further, technology helps address, though not eliminate, the asymmetrical share of voice in the public sphere that has historically been faced by the poor, women, minorities or members of the LGBT community, helping address one of the primary critiques offered on the Habermas model of the public sphere by Nancy Fraser (1990).

Anonymous, by its very nature, is not exclusionary. The barrier to direct or indirect participation is limited only to access to the Internet and a smartphone, laptop or tablet. While that remains a barrier for those of limited

economic means, with about 65 per cent of Americans using at least one social network (Pew Research) it is less of a barrier than those social, cultural and economic barriers preventing women, minorities, the LGBT community or the poor and working poor from historically being active and equal participants in the public sphere. Gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity can all be hidden (or exalted) on social media networks like Twitter. An individual's personal characteristics are not inherently limiting. Given this, one can only conclude that Internet-mediated communication expands the capacity of the public sphere.

People who choose to follow Anonymous, and remember that this is a diverse audience, are seeking an alternate source of information that they see offering a different perspective than that delivered by traditional media or the established political class. While there is a meaningful skew toward people with progressive politics, the audience is more heterogeneous than might be expected, not limited to anarchists or Occupy Wall Street activists but representing a widespread group of people.

It shows that the public sphere, even in something as niche constructing as Twitter, is in fact, as Boham (2004) argued, a multiplicity of publics. These publics can be united through an interest in the online messages, and offline activities, of Anonymous, but it is far from a cohesive community.

The data in this thesis supports the arguments of Clay Shirky (2011) and Terje Rasmussen (2014) who concluded that the rise of social media and the Internet creates opportunities for much greater levels of engagement by individuals within the public sphere – posting on issues, sharing the views of others, and raising consciousness on matters they find concerning. While media power remains equally important as a part of the public sphere, as Habermas posited, the nature of that media power has changed sharply. It is no longer confined to the increasingly large conglomerates that own the bulk of mainstream media in North America. Social media allows communications to be increasingly participatory, for citizens to move from passively consuming media

to actively producing it and sharing it. In this way the voice of the individual becomes stronger.

Still, that stronger voice for others previously limited or excluded in the public sphere does not mean we have evolved to a digital polity gathered around a shining city on a hill where consensus is easily reached. Indeed the evidence that social media enabled engagement or activism achieves meaningful outcomes is muted at best. While Twitter and Facebook became symbols for freedom in countries without democracy (such as the uprising in Egypt) it has not yet resulted in measurably better government or regulatory frameworks in countries like Canada.

On its best days democracy is messy form of government, one that becomes messier still as the number of voices and the volume at which they speak within the public sphere increases. Yet it is that very messiness that makes democracy the essential form of governance. Only by adding more voices and becoming more truly inclusive can a democracy claim to represent the interests of more of its citizens. Social media takes us beyond the bourgeois limitations of the original conceptualization of the public sphere to something new. While imperfect, it is better.

We also see a clearly symbiotic relationship between Anonymous and traditional media outlets. Anonymous operates without the constraints of traditional media, not necessarily concerned about validating sources or confirming details. The traditional media coverage further enhanced the role of Anonymous, which in turn drove still more media coverage that lent it the perception of greater power and influence. It was a repeating cycle.

The rise of social media enabled non-state actors does not imply a coordinated level of engagement. As we have seen, Anonymous has a muddled and mutative political philosophy. Indeed it is difficult to assign the group a central philosophy. Rather it takes various elements of what David Golumbia (2013) termed cyberlibertarianism as well as elements of anarchism, socialism and liberalism. While its political philosophy lacks focus, it does unite under the

central theme of challenging powerful institutions (be they police, government, churches like Scientology, or powerful corporate interests).

There is power in the public sphere. However the ability to exercise that power is still limited as the institutions of power within society grapple with how to deal with it. Yet the case of Rehtaeh Parsons also indicates the potential for that newfound power to go awry. With the technology comes power and with that power comes the opportunity for abuse. In the case of Rehtaeh Parsons we saw that power used, perhaps not entirely comfortably, to argue for what some would consider a more just result. Yet that same power can be misconstrued and, without the social or legal constraints that state or state-sanctioned actors operate within, can be used in ways that might not be beneficial to society.

The power of groups like Anonymous to exert influence creates a clear tension, something that was quite visible in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons. Anonymous could claim to “solve” the case in two hours, but that does not mean that the authorities could credibly lay charges based on what Anonymous had found. That creates a tension between the will of the people (at least those engaged by Anonymous) who quite rightly want justice to be served, and the needs of authorities to follow the rule of law. While people want justice to be a “black and white” issue, the reality that police and the courts deal with as a result of a long history of jurisprudence is sketched in shades of gray. That tension is not new in a Western democracy, but the ability to give the public a form and forum to express their views, organize and more directly influence authorities is new.

While it can be argued that Anonymous is well intentioned in at least some cases, the power it is able to wield is not without its concerns. Indeed, one obvious downside to an enhanced public sphere where Anonymous has power and influence is the rise of online “mob rule.” Or as Chris Selley (2013) wrote in the National Post, “As if contemplating a tormented child taking her own life isn’t horrible enough, we must now live with online blame-mobs grabbing hold of a narrative and demanding justice — and not necessarily in a courtroom.”

Without constraints that have evolved over years of democracy are we raising the risk of entering a period of Internet-enabled ochlocracy where only the loudest voices hold sway? What then if Anonymous takes on an issue with even more complicated ethical concerns? Or more simply – what if they are wrong? While it may make the public sphere more inclusive and representative of the population as a whole, that does not necessarily mean it is of a net benefit to society.

A dispassionate consideration of the work of Anonymous in #OpJustice4Rehtaeh must conclude that Anonymous did create and mobilize pressure on the police, Crown prosecutors and elected officials that ultimately changed the course of the investigation, despite the protestations of these institutions that Anonymous did not have any influence whatsoever. Anonymous created that power by mobilizing a group of people well beyond Nova Scotia, combining online and “in real life” activism to drive a public discussion and traditional media coverage about the case of Rehtaeh Parsons that in turn sparked a broader conversation about rape culture. An inclusive public sphere, which leverages the accessibility and the growing ubiquity of social media, allows more people to be involved in the conversation. If the public sphere, as Habermas described, “points” government, business and society in a specific direction, then more people now have the ability shape that direction.

So in considering whether Anonymous is a repudiation or reification of the public sphere we must address the concerns of the vigilante nature of an Anonymous “op.” Breaking the law, or ignoring it, in the pursuit of another justice is, at best, troubling. The data and analysis contained herein clearly indicates that Anonymous has carved out a meaningful role for itself in the digital public sphere, even if that role becomes something of a moral quagmire. We see it in the way Anonymous activates an issue and leverages its network and tactics to raise it in forums of the public sphere.

Habermas formulated his concept of the public sphere well before the advent of the Internet or social media. Given the power social media extends to the individual and groups like Anonymous who have no formalized role in policy

setting, it is clear that today our view of media in the public sphere must be expanded. We can no longer assume that traditional, large, corporately-owned media outlets are the only representation of media in the public sphere. Traditional media are no longer the sole arbiters of what is important to the broader population. Indeed their relevance is fading compared to the rise of individual communication in social media. Social media offers tremendous potential for an individual to communicate a point of view on an issue. But beyond that, and more importantly, it also allows individuals to organize with others to exert influence in ways that were not possible before. The Internet and social media are transforming the public sphere, and fundamentally changing the traditional power dynamic.

Still, this research is but one step on a longer journey of understanding how the public sphere has evolved in these still early days of the social media age, and how these communications tools allow a weakly coordinated group like Anonymous to exert influence.

This thesis attempts to answer questions about the changing nature of the public sphere brought on by the emergence of the Internet and social media by explore the role of Anonymous in creating and directing public opinion surround the investigation into the assault of Rehtaeh Parsons. It uses mixed methods research to explore the topic. While this data does produce interesting insights, it cannot be viewed as exhaustive or definitive. The qualitative research helps us understand the nature of communication from Anonymous through its primary Twitter account, and the quantitative data creates an understanding of the nature of people who follow @YourAnonNews on Twitter.

Yet there remains a gap in understanding the influence of Anonymous and the community of interest it created around Rehtaeh Parsons. We know what Anonymous attempted to do with #OpJustice4Rehtaeh and its tweets, and who consumed that content. But we don't yet have the technology to fully understand what happened then, both online and offline, and how that combined with other factors in the public sphere to influence the eventual outcome of the case.

In addition, our understanding of the social, cultural and political implications of the increasingly pervasive use of social media in North America is in its early days. There are few who would suggest that social media is not a vehicle for tremendous influence within the public sphere. Yet our understanding is limited, and the rapid pace of change within the realm of social media makes arriving at firm points of view a challenge. For example, Twitter is perhaps fading as a force (as of this writing) while other platforms like Instagram and Snapchat emerge. The increasing ubiquity of new messaging platforms like Whatsapp also has the potential to render even greater change. Each platform evolves its own culture and language, and speaks to different segments of the online audience. It is a remarkably dynamic time period. That makes arriving at a consensus on the nature of social media and its impact difficult.

Despite the limitations inherent in a study of this nature, it does help us better understand the evolution of the public sphere as the use of social media becomes entrenched in global society. We see that it is a force for aggregation, for collaboration and for activism that can, as evidenced in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, influence behaviors of the traditional institutions of power.

But that power is also open to abuse. While many would judge the objectives of Anonymous to be noble in the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, their efforts are still uncomfortably close to vigilantism for many, even if their cause is just. But then if the institutions of power have failed – as many would argue the police and legal system did for Rehtaeh Parsons – then is that ultimately wrong? We struggle with a moral conundrum.

Let's leave the last word to Rehtaeh Parsons's father, Glen Canning. He does not equivocate, rather crediting Anonymous with finding justice for his daughter. "Why go through the courts? Why go through the system?" he told the *Toronto Star* in August of 2015. "Why be revictimized again when you can write something and get a hold of some people online who can really do a hell of a lot more to bring you a sense of justice than the police and the courts can?"

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