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# The influence of the Internet on Identity Creation and Extreme groups

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Abstract:

In the age of the Internet, extreme groups have seen resurgence in the way they can communicate and recruit through the new medium whether they are white supremacists or hacktivists. Examining the history and modern behaviors of both white supremacy groups and Anonymous, this paper aims to research and answer how the different groups use the Internet to influence identities and if the methods to do so differ from the old ones and through the use of several concepts, mainly the Echo Chamber and the Filter Bubble, narrow down the effects that leads to a person joining an extreme group.

Keywords: Identity creation, hacktivism, white supremacy, echo chamber, filter bubble.

## Table of Contents


**1. INTRODUCTION** 4

**2. History, formation and communication: Extreme Right-wing populism** 7

2.1 - Definition and history 7

2.2 - Web 2.0, The Online Disinhibition Effect, Move to Social Media 9

2.3 - Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles 13

2.4 - The Filter Bubble and radicalization 16

2.5 - Conclusion 19

**3. We Are Anonymous: Hackers, vigilantes and Lulz** 22

3.1 - History of hackers 22

3.2 - 4chan and the early days of Anonymous 23

3.3 - Chanology and the Formation of Anonymous 25

3.4 - We are Anonymous, Ethics of hackers 28

3.5 - Conclusion 31

**4. Comparisons and conclusions** 33

4.1 - Similarities 33

4.2 - Differences 35

**5. Conclusion** 37

**References** 39

# 1. Introduction

*”I wouldn’t say no to punishfuck this stupid whore and put my Aryan seed in her mouth”*

That is how Lisa Bjurwald begins her book “Skrivbordskrigarna”, with a very vile quote from the forum Flashback. Neither she nor I chose to start a paper with this quote with the sole intention to shock or disgust, but to try to prove a point. The users of the Internet have probably all seen similar quotes throughout the escapades on the Internet. No matter what kind of website one visit, from the vilest to the most innocuous, hateful comments will be seen from time to time. Hate has become so commonplace on the Internet that it doesn’t even draw much attention anymore if it isn’t egregiously over the line.

The early computer scientists of many fields had a utopian dream about the Internet, it would revolutionize our way of living in every way, and it would break barriers and democratize the world in an unprecedented way. Pariser (2011) said “The California futurists and techno-optimists in those pages spoke with a clear-eyed certainty: an inevitable, irresistible revolution was just around the corner, one that would flatten society, unseat the elites, and usher in a kind of freewheeling global utopia.” (p. 10) In essence, they were right, the Internet did change the world, one has the knowledge about the world and beyond at the fingertips, but alas, they are still human with all the flaws and biases that follows.

Fringe groups outside of the normal discourse of society were quick to capitalize on the capabilities of the Internet and even before as there was an organized Nazi presence on Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in the 80's (Bjurwald, 2013). Both the BBS and the later Internet became a way to both voice their opinions without the prying eyes of the public, and also a recruiting tool. From putting up posters in some small cities to being able to announce their ideology to the world, Internet has become one of the most important tools for the extreme political groups for much of their activity.

On the other end of the spectrum at roughly the same time during the 80's, fledgling groups of hackers either with an ideology or without became active. These people also started out on BBS networks and later migrated to the Internet, sharing amongst themselves knowledge how to hack, secrets, exploits etc. The first attacks were often of military significance, but later became more "hacktivist", for example the attack on the DOD (Department of Defense) servers in 1990 can be classified as hacktivist but bore resemblance to"…military hacking that had historically taken place in the 1980s, the earliest days of hacking" (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 118). Initially this group of people was small, but would later become one of the biggest players in modern politics and activism.

What binds these groups together is the identity creation process using the Internet that they both employ, where anonymity and masks can be used both for concealment and more effective recruiting, maintenance of ideologies and dissemination of information. The reason for telling the tale of both of the movements is to make comparisons between the two in terms of their identity creation on the Internet as they both have differences and similarities in their identity creation and ideologies that influences their identities. And as such, the question that will try to

be answered is *how do extreme groups use the Internet to influence identity creation and has the methods changed with the advent of the Internet?*

For the political groups, social ostracizing was a reality if they were known to harbor their opinions. Total anonymity or creating a mask with a nickname was an effective countermeasure against the social implications of engagement in a racist group as the one who voiced hateful comments couldn't be identified. The hackers in turn hid behind their anonymousness to hide their involvement in the mayhem that they created, hacking servers, doxing, pranks and whatever else that they wanted to do. Even before they became truly organized with a clear ideology they were a target by police forces all around the world for their deeds which could land them in jail.

The political stance on anonymity is a hot topic in our connected world, people are always at the ready to notify everyone where one is and what one is doing, Turkle (2011) says that "The technology has become like a phantom limb, it is so much a part of them. These young people are among the first to grow up with an expectation of continuous connection: always on, and always on them" (p. 36). I am not going to delve too deep into the politics surrounding the Internet, but I will skirt the issue when writing about Anonymous whose ideologies lie in line with Edward Snowden who said in the documentary CITIZENFOUR (2014) "…people self-police their own views, and they literally make jokes about ending up on "The List" if they donate to a political cause or if they say something in a discussion, and it's become an expectation that we're being watched."

Based on the quote "At the primary level of our own experience we know that different forms of communication will inflect how we present ourselves and therefore how we experience ourselves"

(Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2009, p. 209), is anonymity the act of hiding oneself or exposing oneself outside of the technical context?

## 2. History, formation and communication: Extreme Right-wing populism

### Part 2.1 – Definition and history

For this chapter, I need to first define the group that is researched. The extreme right-wing of the political spectrum consists of a big range of groups with similar ideologies of which authoritarianism and nationalism is a common trait according to Hilliard and C.Keith (1999) "…racist skinheads, neo-Nazis and right-wing revolutionaries… promoting in various combinations and to varying degrees authoritarianism, xenophobia, conspiracy theories, nativism, racism, sexism…" (p. 43). Groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS can in this definition be considered a far-right/radical right movement and there are similarities in their use of media; however, no such group will be researched in this paper although parallels are drawn throughout. Instead, the focus will first and foremost lie upon Stormfront but will also focus on the white supremacist movement as a whole, forums like Flashback and other nationalistic groups in Europe and the US.

Racism/white Supremacy is nothing new to the world (Slavery, apartheid, Hitler…) but it among other atrocities has been in apparent steady decline worldwide according to Borenstein (2011) in The World Post, "…historically, we've never had it this peaceful. That's the thesis of three new books, including one by prominent Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. Statistics reveal

dramatic reductions in war deaths, family violence, racism, rape, murder and all sorts of mayhem…Pinker says one of the main reasons for the drop in violence is that we are smarter. IQ tests show that the average teenager is smarter with each generation….And that increase in intelligence translates into a kinder, gentler world, Pinker says."

Paradoxically then, the Internet has given extreme political groups powerful new tools to recruit, communication and information spreading, "15-20 years ago, racist actors spread their message using flyers, stickers and self-copied magazines. The crowd reading it was small, as was the recruitment base" (Bjurwald, 2013, p. 9). Then and now, the economic capabilities of these groups are small, which means they need to pursue paths that are low cost or free. Stormfront was created by Don Black in 1995 who had a past in other white supremacist movements like the Ku Klux Klan and also went to jail for plotting to overthrow the island Dominica, it was also there that he learned how to make and host a website and it was one of the first websites made with a white supremacist ideology (Lloyd, 1999, August 12). It is now one of the biggest white supremacist websites in the world, according to a report from Beirich (2014, summer) that Stormfront has 268000 registered users and a visitor rate that brings it up to an Alexa ranking of 37916 globally and rank 15930 in America (Alexa, 2015).

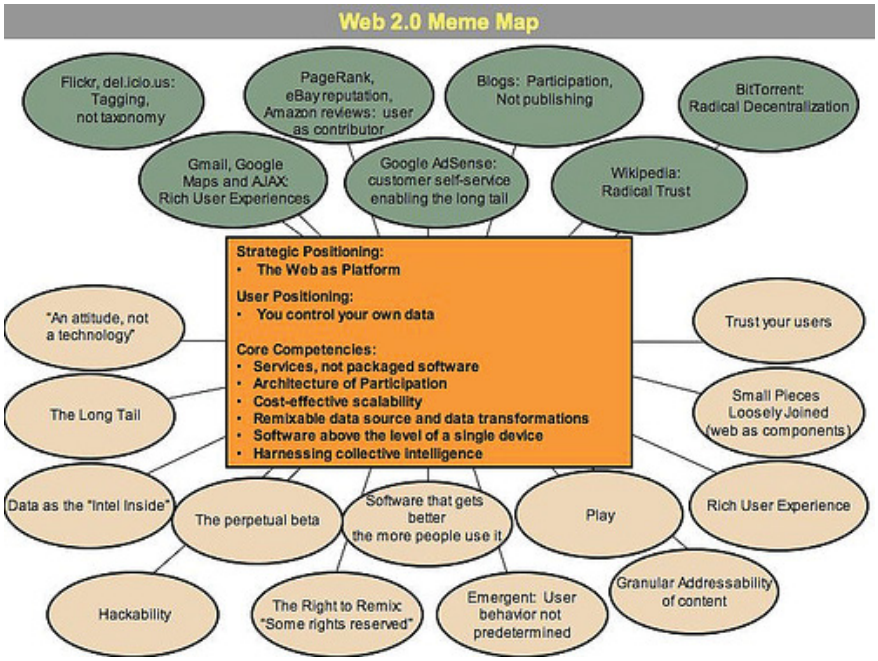
Like other white supremacist websites, Stormfront used the Internet for the cheapness and efficacy for dissemination of organizational propaganda to a mass audience, the relatively "free" space, not limited by media and political constraint and especially on the subject of Stormfront, providing a forum for communication (Adams & Roscigno, 2005, December). Stormfront itself consists mainly of a forum, but with several "stickied" posts proclaiming the ideology and other static information. This does make them a bit of a special case as it doesn't operate as the usual website does. A parallel that can be drawn for the white supremacy usage of the Internet lies in a

letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of Al Qaeda operations in Iraq, where Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media” (Theohary & Rollins, 2011, p. 3), words that resonates with the strategies that radical right groups use. Both of them know the power of the media, and not necessarily the traditional media as those are costly to set up and an established media company wouldn’t print the propaganda of an extremist group, whereby both of the movements have to find alternate sources for their information spreading.

But Stormfront was relatively isolated, although big, it had few compatriots and none of the same magnitude, presumably because of the skills needed to open a website. But as the Internet progressed and came closer to the Web 2.0, it became easier and easier for the layman to host a website and blogs.

**Part 2.2 – Web 2.0, The Online Disinhibition Effect, Move to Social Media**

The Web 2.0, a concept for the web proposed by Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle is explained by O’Reilly as “Like many important concepts, Web 2.0 doesn't have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core. One can visualize Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles, at a varying distance from that core.” To show this, O’Reilly uses the following image:




It is a concept that emphasizes user-generated content using such platforms as blogs and Wikipedia and when it first really hit its breakthrough, it was through blogs and as with preceding mediums, it was quickly adopted and heavily employed by the fringe groups that existed. It was however used in another way than the old websites but worked in symbiosis with them. Websites are static, stable and is better suited for political communication, manifestoes and other things that don't need continuous attention while according to Bjurwald (2013) "… it is quite useless to put up a political manifesto on a blog, as the new posts will soon push down the manifesto of the page. Finally, it ends up tucked away in the archive." (p. 68). Instead used as the later social media would be used, blogs were used as a forum to inspire and meet companions.

The larger scope possible that the Internet gives them is not the only advantage that it affords these groups however, of great importance, especially for the early websites and forums was the anonymity that could be achieved. "The possibility of anonymity online makes it possible for men and women to engage themselves in extreme groups and parties without risking their

reputation, their work and their personal safety."(Bjurwald, 2013, p. 49) Anonymity does however exacerbate some problematic effects, most notably, The Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004). The quote used in the beginning of the introduction is presumably a symptom of this effect. Put simply, it is the safe feeling behind the screen; no one knows who's behind that screen and one does not need to deal with consequences of words and/or actions, lost is the vital feedback of face to face communication and one cannot therefore analyze the other person's feelings (Holland, 1996). This is in part what gives rise to the casual hate on the Internet as the lack of empathy induced by this effect lets one say and do things one wouldn't in real life, where both social and intrinsic implications would arise with one's actions. For example, Arthur Santana of the University of Houston found that 53 percent of comments on newspaper websites that allowed anonymity were vulgar, racist, profane or hateful. In comparison, 29 percent of comments on non-anonymous newspaper websites were of uncivil nature writes Heyboer (2014, January) This theory was proposed before the popularization of social media and so deals only with websites, image boards, blogs etc. that are all masked and/or anonymous but it doesn't seem to stop there; it reaches even further into non-anonymous media like Facebook (Love, 2011, May). Humans seem to sometimes lose some grasp of the real and the virtual, mixing them together while one feels safe behind our screens. Like the hateful comments on a forum, posts made on social media in the heat of the moment can snowball, leading to real world consequences that the poster did not foresee (Vaas, 2015, May).

For the social media presence of the white supremacy movement, some of the groups have a specific page, like the American Nazi Party with the Twitter handle @ANP14 or the group will voice themselves through prolific members. Don Black, the founder of Stormfront, has a Twitter (@StormfrontWPWW, though not very active at the moment) and so does David Duke

(@DrDavidDuke), an active member of Stormfront who have also been co-host on the Stormfront radio show with Don Black[1]. J.M Berger and Bill Strathearn (2013) called these big accounts, whether they are an individual or an organization, a "Seed" account. Note that very few of the groups seem to have a presence on Facebook, why this is can be speculated on but a guess is that they are deleted as they are marked as hate speech by opponents or they may be hidden and invite only. Social media marked a clear departure from the websites earlier used and a paradigm shift in the way radical right groups communicated with themselves and the rest of the world. Anonymousness is not a privilege that social media can afford a person; one will most likely be exposing oneself to the world.

With that said, it seems that while there is a presence on social media and a fairly sizeable congregation around the "seed accounts", the white supremacy movement as a whole has split and moved on to other sites not necessarily lauded as social media or social networking sites as those have some distinct features which boyd et al. (2008) describes saying "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site." The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) released a study in their spring intelligence report saying that "The most violently racist Internet content isn't found on sites like Stormfront and VNN any more" (Hankes, 2015, Spring). Rather, the movement has seemingly primarily moved to reddit, a website that can be described as social news rather than networking as the users contribute what will be seen by posting and voting, an example of Web 2.0 in essence. On reddit, there has been

[1] http://davidduke.com/join-david-duke-with-special-guest-theodoric-live-on-stormfront-radio/

a surge of white supremacy propaganda, most notably the foundation of the subreddit "GreatApes" and the network called "The Chimpire" containing 46 active racist subreddits. Days before the aforementioned article, an article on The Daily Stormer, an offshoot of Stormfront, came out with the title "Reddit is Fertile Ground for Recruitment". The article goes beyond the outwardly racist subreddits and focuses on regular ones, saying "Other fertile grounds for recruitment on Reddit are the European-dominated subreddits, in particular, /r/worldnews, /r/worldpolitics, and /r/europe." (Slay, 2015, 5 March). This surge was in a way predicted by Breivik (2011) in his manifesto just a few years before saying that "Social networking sites will be essential for the consolidation / recruitment purposes in the coming decades."

As can be assumed from this quote by Breivik (who was also a member of Stormfront), communication with the outside world is not the main purpose of white supremacy social media/networking, even if that is a possibility. Social media/networking works as a tool to recruit first and to establish an "Echo Chamber", a concept which will be explained further but that is described well the video titled "This Video Will Make You Angry" (CGPgrey, 2015) saying "When opposing groups' gets big they don't really argue with each other, they mostly argue with themselves about how angry the other group makes them"

**Part 2.3 – Echo Chambers and Us vs. Them**

An Echo Chamber which I spoke about earlier is nothing new, although it is a relatively new word and is a method for creating bias in political debates. Through repetition of a message with various degrees of exaggeration by like-minded people, one makes most people assume that some variation of the story is true (Sourcewatch, 2011). Although originally applied to

traditional political parties like the US democrats and republicans, the term can be applied to any movement and for a lack of better a better word, this will be used. The Echo Chamber thrives in partisan movements, “anti-something” cultures are a perfect match for this type of rhetoric and a requirement for extreme groups like Stormfront. While there are examples of the Echo Chamber in traditional media in relation to political parties where for example a billionaire has bought or bribed a newspaper to slander a political candidate (Parry, 2006, 27 December), an example of the effect is hard to find in relation to the Internet as the concept is quite new and nebulous and little material has been written on it but also because the method of creating the Echo Chamber is employed in different ways, and not always with the clear intent by a group. For the echo chambers that have been established for political parties are more event-like, something that is done before the elections to sway the vote, in contrast, the echo chambers of the Internet is more of a slow-brew, always on but not as active as the official political ones. For an example of the Internet Echo Chamber, one can look at reddit and how it is built which is by establishing smaller subreddits which acts like forums for a particular topic, like gaming, food, fishing etc. As already established, out of the ordinary topics like those, there are several subreddits that is dedicated to hating particular groups of people like black people or Jews. One of the newer subreddits to have existed was /r/fatpeoplehate, a forum dedicated to hating fat people, garnering a subscriber count of around 150 000 before being closed down due to violation of site rules. A user of one of these subreddits would then hear the same message time and time again, in the end coming to accept and believe in the hate spread by the other users. The subreddits in themselves are then Echo Chambers, the context of the topic of the specific forum determines if the users of that specific forum will veer towards a worldview.

The quote by CGPgrey used earlier alludes to the theory of Ingroup vs. Outgroup or more colloquially called Us Versus Them which Bjurwald (2013) explained as “The dehumanizing rhetoric is the same as racists used long before the Internet took shape. Ethnic minorities likened to pests like rats, cockroaches, parasites.” (p. 89) An Echo Chamber is in essence a way to create an Us vs. Them situation and so a white supremacist group will use the Echo Chamber as a means to an end to make their ideology normalized and to further solidify the group around the hate. This can be done through various means and mediums, music for example is a way to convey the hate, something which Arno Michaelis, a former White Power leader attests to in a video by Suzanne Stratford (2013) saying “The music was absolutely essential to maintain the level of hate that is necessary to hurt people”. Another way is to make video games that contain negative stereotypes of non-white and Jewish origin, literally making them the enemy of the game (Left, 2002, 21 February). In the age of the Internet then, the Echo Chamber is used by white supremacists through both social media, particularly Twitter and social networking sites like reddit. The situation on reddit was outlined earlier, where white supremacist groups had begun spreading to not outwardly racist subreddits. The Echo Chamber is created by “hijacking” threads or entire subreddits, “When a /r/Europe poster notified the board that they were being targeted for recruitment, it was at first met with sarcasm: "Well, no one ever accused neo-Nazi's of being smart," replied one Redditor. But within a single day, the discussion had turned to comments like this: "its funny, hitler tried to warn you about the jews, now we live in debt to jewish usury and are being turned into minorities in our own countries." (Biddle, 2015, 13 March)

I want to draw attention to this in particular, as the “Us Versus Them” is a powerful force. Popularized by Henri Tajfel during the 70’s and 80’s, he made several works regarding the topic

and came to such conclusions that humans can form distinct groups, both favoring themselves and looking down on the other group in a matter of minutes over small matters such as preference of a painting (Tajfel, 1970). It is a side of human nature that has enabled many wars through propaganda and to attest the power of it, Hermann Goering of Nazi Germany described it saying "Naturally the common people don't want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country." (Snopes, 2007)

**Part 2.4 - The Filter Bubble and radicalization**

To understand the way white supremacist groups use the Internet to shape an identity, one have to understand both the Echo Chamber and the synergistic force of the customization of the Internet, or more commonly called the Filter Bubble. The example that Eli Pariser first used to prove his theory and concept of the Filter Bubble was an experiment during the British Petroleum oil (BP) spill in the spring of 2010, "…while the remains of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig were spewing crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, I asked two friends to search for the term "BP." They're pretty similar—educated white left-leaning women who live in the Northeast. But the results they saw were quite different. One of my friends saw investment information about BP. The other saw news. For one, the first page of results contained links about the oil spill; for

the other, there was nothing about it except for a promotional ad from BP." (Pariser, 2011, p. 9) The problematic effects of this is brought up by Pariser (2011) saying "Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another's point of view, but instead we're more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we're being offered parallel but separate universes." (p. 11)

What this means is that finding like-minded individuals, exchanging information and debating has never been easier, it was what all the computer scientists dreamed of and thought would happen. But it has also never been easier to create an information bubble around oneself, creating and reinforcing confirmation bias and shutting out other ideas, minimizing cognitive dissonance. The user does not even need to do it by themselves as the browser, apps, phone and every other smart technological gadget does it for them as they tailor what is seen based on habits. The social networks and other services are free because the user is the product (Edwards, 2014, 14 August). In this way, The Echo Chamber and the Filter Bubble work in synergy to radicalize people.

Because of the small amount of hard material of the path a potential white supremacist takes, one has to look towards other models and assume that the structure and path of radicalization of a white supremacy group bears resemblance to the stages of radicalization that Jihadi warriors go through. This particular structure of radicalization to jihadism was researched by the NYPD (New York City Police Department) and the four steps according to them are:

**Pre-Radicalization**: The Point of origin for individuals before they begin the radicalization process.

**Self-Identification**: The phase where individuals, *influenced by both internal and external factors*, begin to explore Salafi Islam, gradually gravitate away from *their old identity* and begin to associate themselves with *like-minded individuals and adopt this ideology* as their own.

**Indoctrination**: The phase in which an individual progressively intensifies his beliefs… While the initial *self-identification* process may be an individual act….*association with like-minded people* is an important factor as the process deepens.

**Jihadization**: The phase in which members of the cluster accept their individual duty to participate in [Terrorist activities] and self-designate themselves as holy warriors or mujahedeen. (United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2008)

From these four steps, one can clearly see that in the identity creating step, "association with like-minded people" is an important step; if not the most important. This essentially demonstrates the power and also the requirement of the Echo Chamber, to be bombarded with the same message over and over again until it is normalized. The other important part of the radicalization process is the self-identification which is influenced by both the Echo Chamber and the Filter Bubble. The Echo Chamber is created first, and influences the person by planting the seed of the culture in the brain, which the Filter Bubble then nourishes by giving that person selected information. After the attack on Utøya by Anders Behring Breivik, Larsmo (2011, July 28) explained "the seed" in an article using a quote by Victor Klemperer saying "Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, they seem to have no effect, but after a while it seems the poison works anyway."

To ground this in the white supremacy movement, one can see a similar pattern in former members of several groups connected to white supremacy, for example Göran says in the

documentary “Skinheads – 25 år senare” (David Eriksson, 2013): “It was here everything began, a small town in the middle of nowhere, and well, didn’t fit in. It is the classical feeling of not fitting in; me and a hundred more have sat here and said the same history. You didn’t fit in, you tried, it didn’t work and then you were alienated”, he says that the camaraderie was the main attraction point for him and further saying that he and his group were in a war against everyone else. The former Neo-Nazi Frank Meeink explained the way he recruited people as “We’d start hanging out with the alternative kids, not that alternative kids like skaters and punk rockers are racist….. but these groups of kids….were kind of picked on a little bit. I remember these main [popular] kids threw a battery at them, like the jock kids one day…..So I went over to the jock kids, pretty big kids, big football players, I went over to them and I said ‘Hey who threw it?’ and they wouldn’t tell me. And then I went back over to the skater kids and said ‘Hey, these kids are never gonna throw anything at you again’.” (WNYC, 2010) Through repetition of their dogma they influence people into a normalization of the ideology, opening up for an engagement in the more outwardly racist groups which then reinforces the beliefs and may also filter out contradicting evidence.

**Part 2.5 – Conclusion**

The technological shift to social media/social networking for the white supremacy movement was not a surprise, they have always been at the forefront of the technological curve and never have they been more vocal nor been able to be this vocal, although the move to social media can be seen as a surprise as it breaks the historically secretive nature of the ideology. This may very well be because of the current trend in the political climate of electing far-right parties in Europe

(Shoichet and Jim Boulden, 2014, May 26) (The Guardian, 2011) but both the human nature and the Filter Bubble can also be implicated in the shift.

The white supremacy movement doesn't use the Internet in any novel ways to influence potential recruits, but they enhance their old methods for a wider reaching audience. The aforementioned sizeable presence on reddit of white supremacy people particularly employ two approaches, one to mainly recruit and the other to maintain the hate both connected to the concepts outlines through the chapter. The recruitment happens in the less outwardly racist subreddits, where the supremacists repeat some form of hate for groups. Going outside the explicitly racist subreddits works because according to Keegan Hankes who wrote the SPLC report, "[Reddit] provides an initial layer of credibility to these noxious ideas that makes it easier to be converted."(Biddle, 2015, 13 March). The maintenance of hate happens on the specific subreddits that are created for the sole purpose of hating non-whites or religions (/r/GreatApes, /r/CoonTown etc.) which acts as Echo Chambers and a filter bubble in one.

To clarify, the white supremacy websites are not gone, Stormfront.org is probably the first search result if searched for it and so is the English Defense League. As before, it is the stable ground upon which they base their ideologies on through documents, videos and manifestoes, the unchanging artifacts of the political movement. Reddit shares similarities to the old websites and forums traditionally used by the white supremacy movement, especially Stormfront which exists mostly as a forum. The main similarity is the ability to mask oneself and/or be anonymous, an affordance that social media does not have. This move can mostly be explained by the Filter Bubble.

With both the automated and the personal bubble one builds up, that is to say who one becomes friends with and what/who one follows, it is not out of the realm of possibility that the extreme ideologies were allowed to establish themselves on social media because the bubble doesn't show one the presence of the groups. If one does not already engage in a white supremacist movement, one's friends will most likely not either, so one won't get information about the group if one does not actively search for it. This also means that social media isn't a very good route to get new recruits but is better suited for maintaining the hate, i.e. an Echo Chamber.

As stated in the introduction, the reason for the far right-wing individuals to value anonymity stemmed from the social implications, if that effect is negated either through the changing political landscape, the effects of phenomena like The Online Disinhibition Effect and the Filter Bubble or most likely a mix of factors; there is little reason to hide behind a mask and/or anonymity anymore. But it seems that the movement has split into several branches that are connected, a masked one on sites like reddit and an unmasked and public one on social media.

An example can be seen in the political party of Sweden called the Swedish Democrats. There have been several scandals where members/politicians of the party express opinions of a more racist nature as they travel outside the realm of social media and into forums and other anonymous platforms (Medered Hårdh, 2015, 10 February) (Berger and Ekstrand, 2014, 5 September). Without going too much into politics, these politicians show another persona or mask when they engage with the public on social media or in the real world. The culprit for this may be as easily identified as The Online Disinhibition Effect, and it is surely a part of the reason. But anonymity is not only a tool for hiding oneself, but to expose oneself intrinsically, the anonymous self is a maskless self.

## 3. We Are Anonymous: Hackers, vigilantes and Lulz

### Part 3.1 – History of hackers

Hacking is not a new phenomenon; if one wants to go back to the absolute first recorded case then Nevil Maskelyne can be lauded as the first hacker when he hacked Guglielmo Marconi's presentation on a wireless, secure telegraph. "…the apparatus in the lecture theatre began to tap out a message. At first, it spelled out just one word repeated over and over. Then it changed into a facetious poem accusing Marconi of "diddling the public". Their demonstration had been hacked - and this was more than 100 years before the mischief playing out on the internet today."(Marks, 2011, 27 December)

In the 80's, hacking and cracking as we know it now began to form. Groups who were mainly composed of computer scientists or amateurs with great technical knowledge began to take shape and attack different parts of the Internet. Many of the targets in the early days were fairly small, a few attacked governmental websites, causing a little mischief while other attacks were of criminal origin, such as the 70 million dollar theft that the First National Bank of Chicago suffered in 1988 (Possley and Cohen, 1988, 19 May). In the 1990's anti-establishment (institutional) hacking started to gain traction in the communities. One of the first attacks was the attack on the American DoD servers that was carried out in 1990 to 1991, although "this particular case is more consistent with the type of military hacking that had historically taken place in the 1980s…" (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 118) it aimed to liberate information and the hackers could seemingly not be tied to any agencies or governments. In this regard, it can still be seen as one of the first hacktivist actions as it bears resemblance to later attacks.

Many of the later cases of hacktivism attacked the different governmental bodies by defacing the websites of said bodies such as the 1996 attacks on the Department of Justice (changed homepage to a picture of Adolf Hitler and "Department of Injustice") and the CIA homepage (Changed the homepage to "Central Stupidity Agency" and adding links to various Internet sites) or the 2001 defacements of Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 118-119). The 2001 attacks were significant in that they were a reaction to military activity by foreign actors, namely Chinese hackers. The methodology was similar to the indigenous attacks, defacing with photos and text, often containing some form of humor or satire.

**Part 3.2 – 4chan and the early days of Anonymous**

The collective now known as Anonymous was born out of the website made by Aaron Poole called 4chan, a copy of the Japanese website called 2chan. "On September 29, 2003, Poole registered the domain 4chan.net and announced it on Something Awful, a Web forum where he was already a regular. He entitled the thread: "4chan.net—English 2chan.net!"(Olson, 2012, p. 27)

In the beginning, all the posts on 4chan had to be posted under a nickname. Early 2004, the user "Shii" published an essay on the value about anonymity. The essay argues for an implementation of the forced anonymity system that is used on the Japanese 2chan board, arguing that anonymity will deter elite cliques, trolls and encourage good posts, among other things saying that "…if you can't tell who posts what, logic will overrule vanity" (Shii, 2004) Prompted by the essay written by Shii, Poole liked the idea that Shii had aired and implemented forced anonymity on a vast part of the website. The transition was not painless; conflict quickly ensued, creating two camps

among the 4chan users, one camp that supported the anonymity and the other supporting tripcodes, a way to circumvent the forced anonymity and be able to use a nickname again, mockingly called “tripfags”, in classical 4chan moniker using “fag” as a suffix (KnowYourMeme, 2010) by the anonymity supporters. In an almost clairvoyant moment, the tripcode supporters saw the future of the anonymity camp: “The tripfags began mocking the anonymous users as a single person named “Anonymous,” or jokingly referring to them as a hive mind. Over the next few years, however, the joke would wear thin and the idea of Anonymous as a single entity would grow beyond a few discussion threads.” (Olson, 2012, p. 29)

4chan earned its infamy during the 2000’s by organizing raids on seemingly random targets, pranking them by spamming shock-photos on a forum, Distributed Denial of Service attacks, bringing a website down by flooding it with trash server requests (DDoS) or simply voting en masse, warping the results in favor of something or someone unrealistic like naming Poole, the 4chan creator most influential person of the year in 2009 (Time, 2009). Their strength relied upon their sheer numbers, the more the better and their methods were similar to the aforementioned attacks during the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

The first raid that could be said to resemble the ideology and modus operandi of Anonymous was the Habbo hotel raid in 2006. “One day, someone on 4chan suggested disrupting the virtual environment by joining en masse and flooding it with the *same character, a black man in a gray suit* and afro hairstyle. The men with the afro then had to block the entrance to the pool and tell other avatars it was “closed due to fail and AIDS.”(Olson, 2012, p. 45) The raid was commenced when rumors began to spread on 4chan that some Habbo moderators tended to ban users based on the skin color of their avatars, part of an ideology that Anonymous would later adopt. The stunt also created a meme, aptly named “Pool’s closed”, spawning real life reenactments in

Finland, where the reenactors dressed in a *black suit and red tie* with an afro.

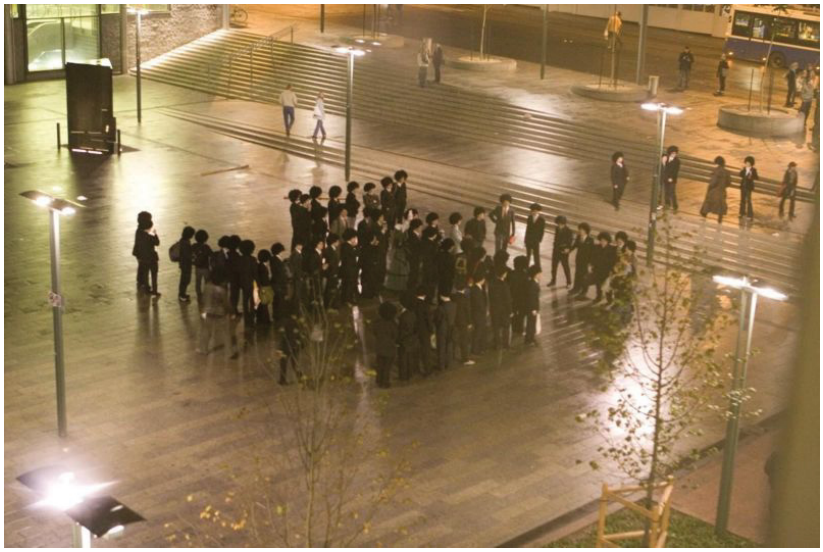


**Figure 1 Taken from http://i3.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/123/667/IRLswastigetfinland.jpg**

## Part 3.3 – Chanology and the Formation of Anonymous

The iconic Anonymous look and ideology came into existence in early 2008 during the "war" against Scientology, or more commonly called "Chanology".

The church of scientology was no stranger to battles with Internet groups, "in 1995, lawyers from The Church of Scientology tried to get the alt.religion.scientology (a.r.s) newsgroup pulled from the Usenet. But the action backfired, and it garnered much press for the a.r.s. newsgroup. The conflict lead to another declaration of war by the celebrated hacker cell Cult of the Dead Cow, which has now gone down in Web lore as: "Scientology versus the Internet"."(IBLS, 2008) The church, according to Olson (2008) "was also notoriously litigious" (p. 55).

Project Chanology started with a video depicting Tom Cruise accepting the Church's Freedom Medal of Valor award in 2004 at the gathering of the International Association of Scientologists. The video features a manic Cruise trying to convince his fellows to commit themselves to the cause all while the Mission: Impossible theme is playing in the background proclaiming among other things: "Being a Scientologist, when you drive past an accident, it's not like anyone else," he says. "As you drive past, you know you have to do something about it. Because you're the only one who can help." (Aleteuk, 2008) The video was posted on YouTube on January 14th 2008. Quickly gaining views, it was with haste taken down at the request of The Church of Scientology in the long effort to keep copyrighted material from the Internet (Vamosi, 2008, 24 January). This proved to be a mistake in the following months as the previous altercations between The Church of Scientology and Internet groups had laid the groundwork for what was to come. Gawker hosted the video next, and even though Scientology lawyers demanded the removal of the video, alleging a breach of copyright, Nick Denton (2008, 15 January) of Gawker.com refused, saying "It's newsworthy, and we will not be removing it."

Project Chanology started as a 4chan user on the /b/ board started a thread titled "Scientology raid?" The accompanying text read:

*"I think it's time for /b/ to do something big.*

*People need to understand not to fuck with /b/... I'm talking about "hacking" or "taking down" the official Scientology website.*

*It's time to use our resources to do something we believe is right. It's time to do something big again, /b/.*

*Talk amongst one another, find a better place to plan it, and then carry out what can and must be done.*

*It's time, /b/."(Olson, 2012, p. 56)*

Hesitant at first, the /b/ board quickly started gaining sympathizers and the fervor of war and "lulz" spurred the users into action. The "proto-Anonymous" started the attacks with their usual style of pranks, DDoSing, harassment through phone calls, "black faxes" to use up the ink and spreading stolen secret documents on file-sharing networks. (Foxnews, 2008, 25 January) Not long into the project, a video entitled "Message to Scientology" was released, a tactic which is nowadays a staple of Anonymous. A war cry and a threat, the video vowed that Anonymous would destroy the church "…for the good of your followers, for the *good of mankind and for our own enjoyment*," (ChurchOfScientology, 2008)

The communication methods within the group incorporated jokes and to a degree the Internet memes that had been spawned on the /b/ board, the DDoS tool that was used was named LOIC, an abbreviation of Low Orbit Ion Cannon, named after a weapon from the game Command & Conquer (WaybackMachine, 2012) and upon usage exclaimed the old somewhat famous phrase "IMMA CHARGIN MAH LAZER". That they would use their own memes to communicate wasn't a surprise, memes is an integral part of the "language" of 4chan. What is interesting is that through the famous lines that marked the end of the "Message to Scientology" video:

*"We Are Anonymous*
*We Are Legion*
*We do not forgive*
*We do not forget*
*Expect us."*

Anonymous managed to turn themselves into a meme. The infamous line itself was appropriated and based on a meme made and used by the /b/ users where rule 3 states "We are anonymous", rule 4 states Anonymous is legion and rule 5 states that "Anonymous does not forgive,

Anonymous does not forget" (rulesoftheinternet, 2015). It changed the definition of the words, both from the inside and to the outside world. The rules were always a warning, a warning not to mess with /b/ as has been shown several times that they will not hold back on causing damage to companies or private persons for "the lulz" (Feinberg, 2013, 10 January). This time, the warning was more poignant as 4chan wasn't a loose group anymore; they had a purpose and a goal which they were ready to achieve through vigilante justice, in their own words "For the good of mankind".

**Part 3.4 – We are Anonymous, Ethics of hackers**

In accordance to those words, Anonymous has tried in their ways to alter the world in a way they see as good. Particularly after the involvement in the Tunisian revolution (======ANONYMOUS======, 2011), their activity has been marked by the will to take down terrorists as after the Charlie Hebdo shooting they declared war on ISIS (Thompson, 2015, 9 January), exposing pedophile rings (pastebin, 2011) and hindering governmental bodies through the usual Anonymous methods, DDoSing, doxing and hacking (Danylko, 2014, 26 November), similar to their origin on 4chan. Their takedown of several ISIS Twitter accounts has been met with critical eyes as it would become harder to monitor ISIS without their public accounts. (BBC, 2015)(Gilbert, 2014, 1 September). And this is where problems arise as their strength is their weakness. Anonymous is by design an ad-hoc movement, a leader may exist for a single operation and then fall back into obscurity. The lack of a leader makes for a great force of asymmetric warfare as there is no head to cut off, but it also means that there is no particular guidance in the operations undertaken. Young and reckless members may bite more than they

can chew (Garcia, 2011, 4 November) thinking they are immune to real world repercussions behind the screen, a symptom of The Online Disinhibition Effect. The before mentioned ISIS takedowns are a testament to the reactionary vigilantism that they employ, meaning well but not thinking operations through, commonly called, the way to hell is paved with good intentions.

From before, it is known that an Echo Chamber and the Filter Bubble is some of the most potent catalysts of loyalty and extremism and it is not absent in this movement. The method differs slightly from the white supremacy groups in how it is established and more notably how it is used. Because the strength of Anonymous is their numbers, the Echo Chamber taps into the mob mentality of the users. The attacks by Anonymous are often a spur of the moment, a reaction to a perceived injustice to the guidelines of the movement, burning hot, fast and bears resemblance to other Internet mobs which in the same way reacts to an action by a third party, starting manhunts (Pickert, Mass, Sorensen, 2013, 23 April) or making petitions and flooding a service in protest (Change.org, 2015) (Hernandez, 2015, 24 April). Compared to the white supremacy groups which burn slowly, nurturing the hate meticulously, for the most part acting non-reactively and in modern times often operate as lone wolves rather than a mob (Lenz and Potok, 2015, spring).

In the tale of one of the more famous /b/ users called Topiary, one can see the effect the community had on him, and the readers can also see the mindset that Anonymous would later have. In an interview with Ryan Gallagher of The Guardian, Topiary, real name Jake Leslie Davis according to an indictment published on Scribd (2012) described himself on Ryan Gallagher's (2011) blog as "an internet denizen with a passion for change". That he says that he is an Internet denizen and not a /b/ user is important as it tells one that the members of Anonymous, given their similar ideological standpoint don't see themselves as the masters of /b/ or any other single website, but the Internet as a whole, the Internet was/is their domain, and the

attempts of authority to “invade” on their territory is heavily frowned upon, an idea that is consistent throughout the movement.

The users of 4chan and much of the hacker community has valued privacy highly, creating groups like the Chaos Computer Club and hiding behind aliases and/or other means of concealment, for reasons that may be obvious (criminal activity) and not they value privacy. The hacker called Kayla, one of the most known figures behind the collective known as LulzSec “…was obsessive about her computer’s privacy. She never typed her real name into her netbook in case it got key-logged, had no physical hard drive, and would boot up from a tiny microSD card that she could quickly swallow if the police ever came to her door.” (Olson, 2012, p. 15) “Kayla” assumed a multi-layered protection system outside of these measures; she built walls, masks and used anonymity in tandem in an attempt to hide the real person behind the screen. The real Kayla is named Ryan Ackroyd, a man from Mexborough in his twenties (Hick, 2012, 16 March). The persona he built, Kayla, was a positive young woman in her teens with no qualms about using her “real name” (Kayla) nor her personal life: “she had a job in a hair salon, babysat for extra money, and took vacations in Spain. She even claimed Kayla was her real name, kept as a “fuck you” to anyone who dared try to identify her” (Olson, 2012, p. 15). He was in a way hiding in plain sight and took extreme precautions to keep this mask intact.

As a movement, they seem to mimic many of the aspects seen in the book made by Levy (1984) titled Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution, although old, it contains the groundwork for most hacktivism. Of particular note is point 2, “All information should be free”, as seen in the Tunisian revolution where they supplied the rebels with means to access the Internet (Norton, 2012, 11 January) and their support for Wikileaks, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange (BBC

News, 2010). This leads to the other main point of the hacker ethics which can be tied to the freedom of information in point 2.

Point 3 says: "Mistrust authority – promote decentralization". The mistrust of authority can be seen through both their involvement in the support of Wikileaks and various attacks on governmental bodies or otherwise powerful entities like the MPAA and RIAA (Olson, 2012, p. 103). Point 3 is a two part statement that aims to give the people more power, decentralization is a good way to do this. In the traditional sense, decentralization means to redistribute the power away from a central entity or location (Merriam-Webster, 2015). Anonymous does this in a way that may not be traditional, but their attacks, support of various causes and usage of the Tor network is a way to transfer power from the big authorities to "the people".

**Part 3.5 – Conclusion**

The Anonymous movement has been shaped by old ideas, ideologies and media and likewise new ones. The formation of Anonymous is marked by specifically two things. The hacker ethics lies as the foundation and can be seen as a very important part of the whole Anonymous movement and its influences can be seen throughout. This poses a problem as the Hacker ethic as it stands now is in effect impossible to follow without breaking laws; this is the predominant reason for the secrecy and "paranoia", tightly keeping their identities a secret even among themselves, a precaution taken as they do not want to land in jail like the LulzSec members did for their crimes (Kaplan, 2011, 19 July). Similarly, they are also shaped by their 4chan heritage

and the philosophy that Shii brought, of a movement without much of a hierarchy, an elite or where one's skin color or gender matters.

The other point to bring up is that according to 4chan, their demographic consists mostly of young adult males, mainly from western countries (predominantly the US) with interests in video games, technology, music, movies etc. and the majority with some kind of higher education (4chan, 2015). This particular demographic (males, 18-35) is marked by high risk-taking behavior (CDC, 2010) (h2g2, 2005). LulzSec was an offshoot branch of Anonymous, with several members in both groups so it can be assumed that the ages for both groups is roughly the same. In LulzSec's case, most were in their early twenties with Tflow being the youngest at sixteen years old and it is during these years that one develops the identity and then reinforces it through connections and relationships as described by Erik Eriksson (cited from SimplyPsychology, 2013). That means that the main demographic is also the children of the digital age. "The teenagers I studied were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many were introduced to the Internet through America Online when they were only a little past being toddlers. Their parents, however, came to online life as grown-ups. In this domain, they are a generation that, from the beginning, has been playing catch-up with their children." (Turkle, 2011, p. 221)

Anonymous sees the Internet as their domain and this mentality can be seen outside of the Anonymous movement as well in regular young Internet users, for when parents or authorities encroach upon their Internet territory, they leave as in the case of Facebook (Begley, 2014, 19 December) for a platform with a demographic more like their own. In the case of Anonymous, they fight those who they deem not worthy of the Internet, whether that is pedophiles or the government.

## Part 4.0 – Comparisons and conclusions

As stated in the introduction, the main reason for telling the tale of both of the movements is to make comparisons between the two in terms of their identity creation on the Internet. They both have differences and similarities in their identity creation and ideologies that influences their identities. I will start with the similarities.

## Part 4.1 - Similarities

According to Seth Stephens-Davidowitz (2014, 12 July) of the NYtimes, the majority of joining members of Stormfront.org whose age is known is younger than 30 where the second highest joining demographic is aged 14-17. According to the teachings of Erik Eriksson's developmental stages, these are the years where one finds the identity and develop it. The demographic numbers might well be because of the discrepancy of technology use between the generations (ipsos mori generations, 2013), but that isn't relevant, it just means that the identities of the younger generations construct their identities more with the help of the Internet. If one looks at the age span of the Anonymous movement based on the arrests that have been made of high profile members and the data on 4chan, one can see a similar range of ages, mostly young adults that grew up with technology or adopted it early on.

Earlier in chapter 1.4, Göran and his skinhead gang during the 80's was brought up as an example to illustrate the point of both the Filter Bubble and the Echo Chamber in regards to the identity creation/shifting that people in extreme groups go through. What was learned here was

that "…me and a hundred more have sat here and said the same history. You didn't fit in, you tried, it didn't work and then you were alienated", also using the example of the former Neo-Nazi Frank Meeink who said similar things in regards to whom they tried to recruit, which was the outsider kids who didn't fit in.

One can see the same kind of drive for Anonymous members. "William" was raised in a low-income household, family torn by divorce and who then lived with his father. He misbehaved in school, swearing at teachers or he would just simply walk out of class. William couldn't see the point of his education. Online though, he was a prankster, leading on pedophiles and then scaring them by pasting the IP address of said pedophile and a warning from the Child Protective Services, he was often the one to push the pranks further with his friends. (Olson, 2012)

Topiary, another famous member of Anonymous had a similar story. Topiary was as a boy fascinated by numbers, preferring the TV program Countdown more than cartoons, analytical and creative, he plowed through the math as a child. He moved when he was young to the small group of islands called the Shetlands to a town called Yell. Topiary didn't like the town much with 900 inhabitants and the island was bleak and "twenty years behind the rest of the country". He was being bullied in school and sensed that the school didn't teach him much. After some tragedies in the family, Jake finally left school and became a recluse. He found solace on the Internet where it was easier to make friends, no one could see his lazy eye and he became bolder and funnier and just as William started pranking people. (Olson, 2012)

From these examples, a pattern can be seen where in essence, it is the vulnerable people that don't feel like they fit in for different reasons that join these extreme groups, where they feel respect, camaraderie and even power. Evidently nothing new at all, Görans gang was formed

over 25 years ago using the same basic concepts for recruitment and maintenance of the group; the only difference in modern times is the Internet. But the Internet has affordances, limitations and implications on identity creation as one feels bolder behind the screen; people can easily form groups and networks that confirm our biases and our automated services helps to limit our view even more. Identity creation with the Internet doesn't add anything new; it enhances and greases what was already there.

**Part 4.2 – Differences**

At a large scope, the white supremacy movement is much more public than Anonymous. They differ from Anonymous in that way as they are a political force that mostly tries to change the system from within, if one does not know what Stormfront stands for, just visit the website to get the political agenda. Now, the individuals of said political groups may very well create personas in public that are mellower than their anonymous personas as seen with some of the politicians from the Swedish Democrats, an example used earlier. These persons use anonymity as a way to hide *who* they are in a more philosophical sense, where anonymity is their core.

Anonymous on the other hand acts as vigilantes, trying to by brute force change the political landscape or bring their own kind of justice to people they deem deserving of it. This also means that their methods are in most cases illegal and in some cases dangerous to both themselves and other people, as seen in the ISIS takedowns and the Mexican cartel kidnappings. Anonymity to them is both a political goal, but also a necessity for their continued work; they use anonymity more directly, not as a way to hide *who* they are (in the same philosophical sense) but *where* they are. The anonymous members are open with their opinions and their fight against what they see

as corruption. Anonymous was born and molded by the Internet, their ideologies, their methods and their volatility resembles the way the Internet works as a whole, Anonymous is an embodiment of the Internet, a raw and unfiltered piece of Internet culture. This cannot be said of Stormfront or most other white supremacy groups who had their core ideologies in place long before the Internet and computers. They adopted the Internet, seeing it as a tool rather than a lifestyle and culture in itself.

## Part 5.0 Conclusion

As the early computer scientists predicted, the Internet changed the world by magnitude in many ways. People are more connected than ever before in human history; anyone can find anything with a few button presses, the social media profiles are indexed by google for anyone to read at a whim and most freely share fairly sensitive information for the public. But while those early scientists thought that the world would usher in a utopian networked society, reality proved them wrong. Humans are not infallible, everyone harbor flaws, biases and cognitive limits (Dunbar, 1992). What the Internet and modern computing did was to enhance what was already there in almost every way. Anything that can be done in the physical world can be done faster on a computer; the desktop, once there to house a number of accessories is now there to place a computer on and little else. The way one creates an identity has not fundamentally changed with the advent of the connected and computerized world but the formative years are more and more influenced by computers and the Internet, a fact that the extreme groups have taken to heart where the old groups like Stormfront adapt to the new technologies and mediums while the new ones like Anonymous are molded by it from the start as they were born into the era. Both movements separated by differing politics and execution of plans but tied to the same methodology to keep their respective movements alive.

For just like how technology enhanced and streamlined work and social networks, it did the same to the identity creation process. The vulnerable people, misfits of different kinds are just like in the past the prime candidates for recruitment into an ideology that goes beyond the norm, the desperation for approval or attention of a group drives these people into the arms of any community that accepts them. The methods used by the extreme groups are old and have not changed in any significant way, because they work using innate human drives, most notably the

paradigm of “Us vs. Them”, a paradigm of humanity that seems to permeate deep. As one dwells in a community and network, the more rooted one will become because of the many voices saying the same thing, creating an Echo Chamber which spurs on the distaste for “them” and then using the Filter Bubble to confine one’s view making it hard to see the other side of the argument, a pattern which can be seen throughout history and whether the group is white supremacist, islamist or hacktivist. Knowing this, an attempt to summarize the steps needed for successful recruitment and to retain members of a group in a few words can be done. These words will end this paper and for simplicity it will consist of three words.

Normalize, Isolate, Reinforce.

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