



We Are Anonymous

**Inside the Hacker World of
LulzSec, Anonymous, and the
Global Cyber Insurgency**

Parmy Olson



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York Boston London

Besides, Topiary had other, bigger distractions. About three hundred miles away in London, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange had heard about LulzSec's takedown of the CIA website, and he was chuckling to himself.

For Assange, a simple DDoS attack on CIA.gov was some much-needed comic relief. Since Anonymous had leaped to his defense in December, he had spent the last few months fighting the threat of extradition to the United States and accusations of treason over WikiLeaks's release of diplomatic cables. Swedish authorities had doubled his problems by charging him with attempted rape, which meant he was now fighting extradition to Sweden too. In the meantime, he was staying in the countryside manor of an English journalist, wearing an electronic tag, and trying to keep up with developments in the world of cyber security. It had been hard not to notice LulzSec. On the one hand, the group looked like fearless comedians. On the other, it clearly had skilled hackers on the team.

Impressed and perhaps unable to help himself, Assange had

opened the main WikiLeaks Twitter account and posted to its nearly one million followers: "WikiLeaks supporters, LulzSec, take down CIA... who has a task force into WikiLeaks," adding: "CIA finally learns the real meaning of WTF." Soon after a few news agencies and websites reported that WikiLeaks was supporting LulzSec, he deleted the first tweet. He didn't want to be publicly associated with what were clearly black hat hackers. Instead, he decided it was time to quietly reach out to the audacious new group that was grabbing the spotlight. On June 16, the day after Ryan set his botnet on CIA.gov, an associate of WikiLeaks contacted Topiary.

"I've got a contact in WikiLeaks that wants to talk to you," the person said, then directed him to a new IRC server that could serve as neutral ground for a private discussion. The network was irc.shakebaby.net and the channel was #wikilulz. Topiary was immediately skeptical and believed the contact was trolling him. When he finally spoke to a WikiLeaks staff member known as q, who was in the channel under the nickname Dancing_Balls, he asked for someone to post something from the WikiLeaks Twitter account. Assange, who allegedly had sole access, did so, putting out something about eBay, then deleting the post. Topiary did the same from the LulzSec Twitter feed. But he needed more proof, since the WikiLeaks feed could have been hacked. q said he could do that. Within five minutes, he pasted a link to YouTube into the IRC chat, and he said to look at it quickly.

Topiary opened it and saw video footage of a laptop screen and the same IRC chat they were having, with the text moving up in real time. The camera then panned up to show a snowy-haired Julian Assange sitting directly opposite and staring into a white laptop, chin resting thoughtfully in his hand. He wore a crisp white shirt and sunlight streamed through a window bordered with fancy curtains. q deleted the twenty-two-second video moments later. Also in the IRC channel with Topiary and q was

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Sabu, now likely with very interested FBI agents monitoring the discussion.

"Tell Assange I said 'hello,'" Sabu told q.

"He says 'hi' back," q said.

At first Topiary was nervous. Here was Julian Assange himself, the founder of WikiLeaks, reaching out to his team. He couldn't think why he wanted to talk to them. Then he noticed what q and Assange were saying. They were praising LulzSec for its work, adding that they had laughed at the DDoS attack on the CIA. With all the flattery, it almost felt like *they* were nervous. For a split second, LulzSec seemed to be much bigger than Topiary had ever thought.

By now a few others from the core team knew about what was happening and had come into the chat room. Sabu had given them a quick rundown of what was going on, then said it could mean hitting bigger targets.

"My crew seems up for taking out traditional government sites," he told Assange and q in the chat. "But seeing as that video was removed, some of them are skeptical."

"Yes I removed the video since it was only for you, but I can record a new one if you want :)," q said.

"If we need additional trust (mainly my crew) then ok," said Sabu. "But right now we seem good."

Then q went on to explain why he and Assange had contacted LulzSec: they wanted help infiltrating several Icelandic corporate and government sites. They had many reasons for wanting retribution. A young WikiLeaks member had recently gone to Iceland and been arrested. WikiLeaks had also been bidding for access to a data center in an underground bunker but had lost out to another corporate bidder after the government denied them the space. Another journalist who supported WikiLeaks was being held by authorities. Assange and q appeared to want LulzSec to try to grab the e-mail service of government sites, then look

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for evidence of corruption or at least evidence that the government was unfairly targeting WikiLeaks. The picture they were trying to paint was of the Icelandic government trying to suppress WikiLeaks's freedom to spread information. If they could leak such evidence, they explained, it could help instigate an uprising of sorts in Iceland and beyond.

The following day, q and Assange wanted to talk to LulzSec again. Perhaps sensing that Topiary was still skeptical, q insisted on uploading another video. It again showed his laptop screen and the IRC chat they were having being updated in real time, then a close-up of Assange himself, head in hand again, but this time blinking and moving the track pad on his laptop, then him talking to a woman next to him. The camera was then walked around Assange before the video ended. The video had been filmed and uploaded in less than five minutes. Topiary, who was experienced with Photoshop and image manipulation, calculated that doctoring the IRC chat and Assange in the same video image within such a short space of time would have been incredibly difficult, and he veered toward believing this was all real.

But q was not asking LulzSec to be hit men out of the goodness of their hearts. There was potential for mutual gain. q was offering to give the group a spreadsheet of classified government data, a file called RSA 128, which was carefully encrypted and needed cracking. q didn't send it over, but he described the contents.

"That's pretty heavy stuff to crack," Sabu told q. "Have you guys tried simple bruteforce?" q explained they had had computers at MIT working on the file for two weeks with no success. Topiary wanted to ask if Assange was going to give the team other things to leak, but he decided not to. Part of him didn't want to know the answer to that. It was already starting to look like LulzSec was on the road to becoming a black hat version of WikiLeaks. If WikiLeaks was sitting on a pile of classified data

that was simply too risky to leak, then it now had a darker, edgier cousin to leak it through.

Topiary decided to mention that LulzSec had been the same team behind the HBGary attack. Assange said he had been impressed with the HBGary fallout but added, "You could have done it better. You could have gone through all the e-mails first."

"We could have," Topiary conceded, "but we're not a leaks group. We just wanted to put it out as fast as possible."

"Yes but you could have released it in a more structured way," Assange said.

"We didn't want to go through 75,000 e-mails looking for corruption," Topiary countered again. He remembered how he had trawled through those e-mails looking not for scandal but for Penny Leavy's love letter to Greg Hogle and for Barr's World of Warcraft character.

The team decided to invite Assange and q over to their IRC network on Sabu's server. Topiary created a channel for them all to talk in and called it #IceLulz. q said he wished WikiLeaks could help the group more with things like servers or even advice, but they didn't want to link the organization too obviously to LulzSec. In fact, when Topiary told q to go ahead and send the RSA 128 file over any time, q seemed to back off.

"Yeah, maybe in the future we'll see how this goes," q said. He never did send the file, at least not to Topiary.

Still, Sabu was "the most excited he had ever been," Topiary later remembered, over the moon that WikiLeaks was asking for his help. It is unclear if Sabu was in reality haunted by the fact that he was now also helping to implicate Assange. Six months prior, he had believed so passionately in the WikiLeaks cause that he was willing to risk bringing his hacker name out into the public for the first time in nine years. Another possibility: the FBI was encouraging Sabu to reach out to Assange to help gather evidence on one of the most notorious offenders of classified government

data in recent times. It seems probable that if Sabu had helped, for instance, extradite Assange to the United States, it would have improved his settlement dramatically.

"It's our greatest moment," Sabu told the crew. He and q started talking in more depth about various websites, and then Sabu sent links to two government websites and a company to the rest of the team, tasking them with finding a way to get into their networks and grab e-mails. Over the next few days, Topiary passed the job of staying in contact with WikiLeaks to Sabu, and for the next few weeks, Assange visited LulzSec's chat network four or five more times.

Topiary left the #IceLulz IRC channel open on his laptop and kept it open. Pretty soon, though, it became just another one of the thirty other channels demanding his attention, another page of flashing red text.

I have sourced the assertion that Assange was “chuckling” to himself from interviews with Topiary, who said that when he was first talking to Assange on IRC, Assange claimed that he and others in WikiLeaks had “laughed” when they heard about the DDoS attack on the CIA.

Details about Julian Assange’s state of affairs in June of 2011, including his defense against extradition and the wearing of an electronic tag, were sourced from various press reports, such as “Julian Assange Awaits High Court Ruling on Extradition,” published by the *Guardian* on November 2, 2011.

Details about the IRC discussions within LulzSec (first between Topiary and Sabu, then among other members of the team) were sourced from interviews with Topiary and with one other hacker associated with LulzSec who does not wish to be named. I have also seen and taken screenshots of the video of Assange taken by q, which was temporarily uploaded to YouTube. The video showed the IRC discussion between LulzSec and a panning shot of Assange looking at his laptop. Dialogue from the discussion between Sabu and q is taken from the same video, which also featured text from the IRC channel they were both in at the time. Sources close to WikiLeaks confirm that q had organized meetings in the past between Assange and other third parties via IRC, and that q is from Iceland. Regarding the filename RSA 128: RSA is a cryptographic algorithm (by Rivest, Shamir, and Adleman). The 128 would refer to the key length, or the strength of encryption measured in bits.

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To: "cryptome@earthlink.net" <cryptome[at]earthlink.net>
Date: Fri, 25 May 2012 11:44:51 -0400
Subject: We Are Anonymous in the New York Times

Hi John,

Hope you're gearing up for a lovely long weekend! You should have just received a finished copy of We Are Anonymous by Parmy Olson; in case this helps you, I wanted to send the incredible review in today's New York Times summer reading round-up:

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Janet Maslin

May 25, 2012

A different kind of Internet history fuels “We Are Anonymous,” Parmy Olson’s reportorial, very accessible account of the global hackers whose targets included PayPal, the Church of Scientology, Sony Entertainment and the Vatican before one of them, Hector Monsegur, known as Sabu, became an F.B.I. informant and brought the hackers’ methods to light.

Reported by the London bureau chief of Forbes, this book delves into the recesses of the so-called Deep Web to understand the saboteurs’ mind-set and methods. The drama in this story is akin to that in the film “The Social Network.” It links teenage rebelliousness, cyberpranks and increasingly dirty Web tricks to dangerous consequences in the flesh-and-blood world.

Let me know if you are interested in covering and if I can get you any more information; the book is out June 5th.

Thanks and all best

Theresa

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Never-before-revealed information from

WE ARE ANONYMOUS

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By Parmy Olson

- For the first time, gives a mainstream audience details about exactly **how the phenomenon “Anonymous” emerged** from an image board called 4chan, when Anonymous users were jokingly referred to as a single entity and a “hive mind.”
- Contains the first detailed account of how the leaking of a suppressed video of Tom Cruise, and a series of comments on an image board discussion thread, led to **the landmark uprising for Anonymous in 2008 against the Church of Scientology**. It shows how a few talented volunteers then sequestered themselves in a private chat room and organized hundreds of others in digital and physical protests, before the hordes were eventually divided by a civil war over objectives.
- Tells the story of how a concentrated team of half a dozen hackers and Anonymous supporters played a key role in the collective’s landmark **operations against targets including IT security firm HBGary Federal, the government of Tunisia, and the Westboro Baptist Church, and how that group went on to form LulzSec**.
- Exclusively reveals that senior representatives from **LulzSec and WikiLeaks held online discussions with each other on June 16, 2011, and for several days afterward, exploring ways that they could collaborate on the acquisition of secret data from the Icelandic government and various corporations**. Gives background details on these collaborations, including how newly tapped FBI informant Hector “Sabu” Monsegur referred to making contact with WikiLeaks as LulzSec’s “greatest moment.”
- Offers an exclusive inside look at **the moment LulzSec unraveled**, with never-before-seen dialogue between the hackers as they argued with one another over whether to continue or end the group after their fifty-day hacking spree against the likes of Sony, PBS, and Fox.
- Contains **the first on-the-record, face-to-face meeting between two supporters of Anonymous**—one being a founder of LulzSec—as they discuss how Anonymous changed their lives.

For more information or to speak with author Parmy Olson, please contact Carolyn O’Keefe, 212-364-1464, carolyn.okeefe@hbgusa.com, or Theresa Giacopasi, 212-364-1437, theresa.giacopasi@gmail.com.