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The Anonymous Storm Surrounding Scientology ENTERTAINMENT

A faceless, unstable virtual army masses to take on the world's most secretive and terrifying religion.



"Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous. Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation, your suppression of dissent, your litigious nature: all these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed...We are anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us."

"Message to Scientology"
January 21, 2008

It's after midnight on March 15 at the Electric Lotus, a hip Indian bar and restaurant in Hollywood, when the secret meeting begins. Five scraggly young men and a Goth girl with purple-streaked hair gather at a long dining table in a dark back room. An Asian dude urgently devours basmati rice as if he hasn't eaten in days. A blond punk in a faded Pixies T-shirt and a black-and-white camouflage jacket keeps glancing furtively at the door.

Finally, a clean-cut 22-year-old in a T-shirt and jeans speaks up. No one here knows each other's real name, so he introduces himself under his pseudonym, Ryan. "We don't know what will happen tomorrow," Ryan says as the others nod. "We don't know what they're capable of."

Ryan's talking about the Church of Scientology, and the group at this table are foot soldiers in an underground army that's waging war against the controversial religion. They call themselves Anonymous, and with the zeal of crusaders and the flair of viral marketers, they have harnessed the Internet to assemble—and attack. They fired their first salvos in the vast, borderless void of the Web; lately they have mobilized in the real world. They take to the streets in Guy Fawkes masks and business suits, like extras in *V for Vendetta*, staging protests in over 100 cities, from Seattle to Sydney, sometimes with more than 10,000 people. Just like the one scheduled for 10 hours from now.

The Church of Scientology brands Anonymous cyberterrorists; Anonymous counters that the church is an oppressive, profit-hungry cult. To a degree, they may both be right, and as highly sophisticated clandestine organizations they have more in common than either side would like to admit. The migration from cyberspace to the real world of Anonymous represents more than just a fight between two cutthroat combatants: It's the electronic mob personified, a new dawn of social protest engineered by young people with tools most people over 30 doesn't understand. "This is our generation's movement," says Sarah, a twentysomething "Anon," as members call themselves. "Every 40 years someone stands up and does something. This is our generation's way of doing something."

As the others dig into their tandoori chicken, Ryan stands up to address some inherent challenges they face. "This is a big sociological experiment," he says. "How does a group with no leaders organize?"

With a sense of both dread and excitement, Ryan outlines the plans for the next day, when the SoCal contingent of Anonymous will descend on Scientology's L.A. headquarters. Though their group has an amorphous structure and no true chiefs, Ryan, an articulate video game developer from San Diego, is one of the main organizers. In a hushed voice awash in anxiety and paranoia—perhaps a natural by-product of an ongoing struggle with one of the world's most feared religions—he says that "Rorschach," one of the most active SoCal Anons, woke up to find a pool of vomited blood next to his cat Mudkips' food dish. The dish smelled like ammonia. The cat was missing and hasn't been seen since. Ryan admits he has no idea for sure who, if anyone, was responsible.

"But this is the kind of thing Scientology does," Ryan says. "They poisoned his cat. They killed Mudkips."


* * *

Monday, January 14, 2008 started like any other day on YouTube. A balding guy with crooked glasses made chamomile tea in one video. Asian kids in a hot pink room danced to hip-hop in another. Then, at 2 a.m., a nine-minute, 26-second clip appeared on the site under the seemingly benign title "Tom Cruise Scientology Video." Against an amber-hued backdrop, the now-infamous clip shows Cruise behaving as we'd never seen him before: passionate, zealous, and seemingly unhinged as he discusses the virtues of his chosen religion. "Being a Scientologist, when you drive past an accident, it's not like anyone else. As you drive past, you know you have to do something about it because you know you're the only one that can really help," he intoned, *Mission Impossible*-like music playing in the background. "We are the authorities on the mind...We are the way to happiness."

In the video, intended as an internal piece of church propaganda, the star of *Risky Business* and *Top Gun* is by turns earnest and fanatical. It's a bravura performance, and one the general public was never intended to see.

Days earlier Marc Ebner, a journalist who has written about Scientology for many years, had been leaked the video, and urgently spread the word. "I wanted to put it up on my Web site, but I wasn't able to do it overnight, so I immediately put

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