SCIENTOLOGY PROTESTS 2008 background

In January 2008, I was just some guy who was bored and cruising the Internet, active in communities like 4chan and what was the early incarnation of reddit and other sites like that, when an interesting post began making the rounds. It linked to a Tom Cruise video regarding Scientology that had obviously not been produced for public consumption. In the footage, the handsome film star is in P.R. mode, extolling the benefits of Scientology and its miraculous virtues, while speaking in a seemingly hyped-up state with “Mission Impossible” style music playing in the background. While the film clip ran over just nine minutes, itself, it was taken from a set of DVDs that spanned over two hours. So the ubiquitous legal forces within Scientology went immediately went into crisis control mode, demanding that the video be removed from all public sites, claiming violation of the Digital Millenium Copyright Act (DMCA). Problem was, since the clip itself was just nine minutes long, it wasn’t subject to that provision and was entirely legal under “fair use” laws. Had it been just a little longer, it would indeed have fallen into that category.

Apparently an ex-Scientologist had posted the video – they were the only ones who would have had access to this highly restricted internal material. And while Scientology legal teams were scrambling to get it removed from YouTube and other sites, the footage spread like wildfire. Within the 4chan and reddit communities, especially, we were offended by the illegal attempts to mis-use the DMCA laws, so it was more a point of principle to us to keep the material up and in the public domain. It became a “freedom o f information” type of issue to those of us who were of an activist mindset – plus the fact that the Scientology agenda was just so outrageously and offensively off-the-wall to most of us. That’s when a few people began talking about a Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS) operation, going after Scientology itself, and “Project Chanology” was born.

At that point, some guy joined our channel on IRC and told us that we should start talking to the press, but none of us had any experience with that, we didn’t have a clue. So we started a channel named “Press” and eight of us in a core group joined it – minus the guy who had made the initial suggestion. We never heard from him again – he just disappeared. So we decided that we needed to put out a press release, but didn’t know how. We went onto a site called something like pr.com and looked at examples of news releases in order to get the format down, and together wrote several paragraphs. But as we wrote, we realized that it read more like a video script than a news release, so we created a You
Tube video as well, giving it the title,” Message to Scientology.” Images of a dark background and an ominous soundtrack set the background for a voice-synthesized message saying, in part:

Hello, Scientology. We are Anonymous.

Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation; suppression of dissent; your litigious nature, all of 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 trust you, who call you leader, has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind--for the laughs--we shall expel you from the Internet

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Knowledge is free.

We are Anonymous.

We are Legion.

We do not forgive.

We do not forget.

Expect us.

That was it. That video, “Message to Scientology” really started everything.

After we made the video and uploaded it, I went to sleep, but was awaken just a few hours later by all these people calling, saying that traffic had knocked down our servers. Apparently, the event had really struck a chord with a lot of people, and the video had been linked to the front page of major news sites all over the world. It was being featured live on CNN and had received over 800,000 views within just those few hours. At the same time, 10,000 or so people were trying to get into our chat channels to see what we were doing next and what they could do to get involved. Of course it helped to have a target like Scientology that seemed to be so universally disliked by so many. But as I said, I believe it was the start of visibility for Anonymous, for our movement. Now that the public was becoming increasing aware, the press was asking more questions and we were putting up websites to help explain. It was a strange, exhilarating few days for us. We had no plans for running with this – we had put up the video as a “troll’ to prank Scientology into thinking the Internet was going after them. Usually these pranks by groups within 4chan and the like would last only a few weeks, then they would find another appropriate target to bother. That was what we had thought. But we were bombarded with traffic. We went to work creating a server situation so that people could connect, ensuring our servers could handle the traffic. We were just trolling-types of guys but we knew we couldn’t have 10,000 people in any one given irc channel trying to talk to each other – it just doesn’t work. So we had to figure out how to get everyone to segregate into more manageable groups. After about an hour’s discussion within our main channel -- named “Xenu”, after Scientology’s galactic overlord – we installed bots with messages asking users to divert to channels named after their city names, which we were scrambling to organize. We tried to appeal to the users’ regional loyalties, saying ‘Let’s see who can get the largest city channel, etc.’ and tried to allay fears among some new anons that they wouldn’t be identifying themselves just by noting their city locations. After all, the numbers were huge. In a few hours there were tons of city channels, as well as country channels – it was a very international movement. One guy who had been feeling useless, and wanted something to do, went to all the channels on the entire server and built a list of the groups. He did the math and came back with the astounding information that we had organized 143 cities in 42 countries of people, all talking about these issues. And we were like, ‘Holy crap. This is the whole world! ‘

So, we debated: What are we going to do with all these people? We argued among ourselves about what the next move should be. What would be the most fun? Because, after all, that’s what it had all been about – standing up for freedom of information, but also going for the laughs, the lulz. What we had was a group that were mostly mad about the censorship. But then, Scientology was also easy to be mad about – it’s not like you were being mad at fluffy little puppies or anything. Scientology sucks anyway, we all agreed. So, someone was scanning YouTube videos and came upon a video made by this former Scientologist, a girl named Tori with an 80’s style boombox, dancing, yelling and protesting all by herself outside a Scientology Center. Then we found some more videos of like five guys grouped to protest at Scientology venues. And we thought, ‘Hey, maybe *we* can move this Internet protest to the streets, too. Let’s send the 4chan-ers outside – get everyone out of their parents’ basements. Who knew what kind of people would show up? This was on the 22nd of January. The Tom Cruise video had come out on the 15th of January, and our “Message to Scientology” had been released on January 21st. Everything had moved pretty fast, but we decided to move faster.

We got together and made another video for YouTube titled “Call to Action”. Again, an ominous voice-senthesized message proclaimed Scientology a threat to global free speech and scheduled February 10th at 10:00 a.m. for worldwide protest at Scientology Centers around the globe. The buzz went out over the internet, eventually getting picked up by some mainstream news outlets and the chatter that we heard made us very hopeful . We thought, ‘What if we could get 1,000 worldwide to turn out? That would be awesome.’

About the Guy Fawkes mask -- One of the things in making “Call to Action” was our focus on anonymity – that it was so important for everyone to understand. After all, Scientologists have a pretty scary track record – you cross them and they will do everything they can to ruin your life. So we wanted people to know that they needed to hide their faces. We didn’t want any Scientologists to follow our guys home and go after them, to be able to identify them and make their lives miserable. So we began to talk about masks. One of the running themes in 4chan was the epicfail guy who wore a Guy Fawkes mask. So that was on our short list; we also discussed using batman masks and those old-fashioned masquerade masks on sticks – fancy ones like they wear for Mardi Gras. We decided to be practical and pragmatic about the masks so we began calling local costume shops and comic book stores, we had people call all over, even in Moscow, to find out who had what kinds of masks and what the pricing was. After just a short amont of research we discovered that just about every major city around had Guy Fawkes masks, and they were reasonably priced, at about $10 and under.

So we made flyers and created posts on different forums suggesting the Guy Fawkes mask. Everyone was already into the “V for Vendetta” movie that had come out sometime before; it was a familiar image to our groups. But the historical Guy Fawkes really had nothing to do with the decision, itself – after all, he was just one religious nut trying to replace another religious nut --- but the mask itself really fit the image that many of us were comfortable with.

So, we were taking it to the streets. We were about a week away from the first protest when a guy comes into the channels and asks, ” Who is in charge here?” First, everyone said, “You don’t understand how this works – Anonymous is a collective, no one is in charge, we all are in charge.” Of course, we did have a small group helping to make suggestions for the group’s acceptance. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have been able to get anything done, just a place to set down ideas. So finally, someone directed him to our little group. And he said he was from Greenpeace.

We said, “What,? What do you want with us?” group with no leader, we did have to segregate ourselves a little to continue making decisions in our little channel, kind of secretive, everything that was getting done came from us, but we set down ideas, didn’t force down through, let anons make their own decisions. But -- Everything being done was being done by us, so they finally directed him to us --

And he told us he was from Greenpeace, “Oh, the guys with guns, huh?” I said “What do you want with us?” <edit note: does greenpeace really use guns? Didn’t think so> He said “I want to give you all some hints about things you may not have considered before. You are sending people out to the front who have never protested before, and you may want to consider a few things: he says you need to give them some rules, we said we can’t do rules, that’s not how we work, how about code of conduct? But what should it say/ don’t throw bricks through windows, no matter what police do, be nice to police so they won’t arrest you when you do minorly stupid stuff. Other very useful stuff to tell people who are going out to the streets for the first time: don’t do this don’t bring that. Don’t bring anything that could look like a weapon. Don’t even bring a pocket knife by accident today, even if it’s your normal walking about things, those types of little hints, so we took his advice and turned into a text file, “22 codes of conduct, “then turned into a video, the third video we put out, which now 100,000s of people were waiting for our next video, and content was to make sure we were nonviolent, cops were treated as good as possible on scene, was a really good helpful thing, one of the funnier things Greenpeace guy said was they have a navy right? Yeah, they have a couple ships, one big cruise ship, “You guys want them blockaded by boats or surrounded or anything, we can surround them, we have boats and guns, and can do anything. What about a blockade against port they are in.” But I said – “We don’t think we want to get involved with anything like that – but it’s funny to know that there is an option.” That was hilarious. Don’t know if the guy was in any position in Greenpeace to do that, we didn’t verify his actual identity – but we went along with who he said he was and really did get helpful advice – aside from the naval blockade part. He was as helpful as can be. Then, as he was signing off, he also left us with one last piece of advice,that was also very valuable. He said that you always should leave them at the end of the first event with knowledge of the next event. So they will go home thinking aobu t how fun today was – and how much fun next month will be. So you can build on it and keep them around. Otherwise, attrition can be problem and, you can lose them. This way, they can all be involved in planning, sharing ideas, making fliers for colleges, spreading the word.

So, many of the New York and Boston people grumbled a bit about the plans for outside protests in February. After all, that is a very cold month in the northeastern parts of the U.S. – and as the date approached we actually had huge blizzards with sideways-blowing snow hit some areas. But one of the dumbest things from our perspective was that we all completely forgot to figure in the fact that cities around the world actually exist in different time zones. We had said, ‘February 10 at 10:00 am.’ And it wasn’t until the night before that we realized, ‘Hey, it’s ALREADY morning in Australia… and Japan.’ And sure enough, we started scanning news sites, chat rooms, YouTube and more, looking first what might be happening at Sidney. Of course, then, in 2008, we had no 3G phones at the time, no good cameras and streaming capability from a phone. People were running back and forth in Sydney, to cyber cafes and uploading to the Internet video for us to see. At five minutes before 10 in Sydney, there were 50 people there! An hour later they ended up with 250 for the protest there. Then we began getting news from Adelaide, from Perth, and from Melbourne. Each of the sites had 200-plus protesters each in attendance. Scientology has a huge presence in Australia, so there was a lot of awareness for the event. So after watching the action in Australia, we turned to Japan only had one guy who showed up for the protest – at the Scientology Center in Tokyo – but for Japan and their more reserved culture, that is pretty ballsy. He showed up and didn’t leave, staying the whole time wearing his mask and holding a sign. We were so amazed and excited by what was happening and ready for our own protests the next morning. Sure enough, the excitement did continue. That next day, we had \_\_\_\_\_ show up in Boston, over 500 in New York. By the end of the day, protesters had shown up in 143 cities around the world, over 10,000 people total. And it had become a big story -- all over YouTube, and the major news outlets picked it up and ran with it. We were so surprised at the impact it made -- We really didn’t think that many would show up. These are people from the internet – they don’t go outside.

And we did use the “Greenpeace” guys advice – about planning immediately for the next event, keeping the momentum going. So we spent next couple days planning what we would do for next month – it was L. Ron Hubbards birthday coming up. Everyone would show up, each group was supposed to bring a birthday cake, wear party hats with their guy fawkes masks, it was all great and they did. The theme for that round of protests was “Party Hard, ” after the Andrew WK song which was a running theme on 4chan at the time. The song was also to be blasted at each event. It’s a horrible song but that was the theme song. It worked, because a good chunk of people returned to next, next, next, still about 50 people still do monthly protests outside scientology centers including New York as of this writing.

Now even some scientology leaders around the world are in prison, we got evidence to French government, we got involved. Wasn;t just protests, members got involved, first two weeks it was just fun, this was just one of the many bad things going on around the world and I certainly didn’t care. none of us were protesters or activists. Myself, I didn’t give a shit about a damn thing, wondering what girl would be my date next weekend, worried about how to keep my job, I didn’t care about what was going on around the world. But within a few weeks though enough of the anti-Scientologists – and a few *former* Scientologists had told us about things that had actually happened to them. And we realized we had all those people going to the streets, had all this press coverage right now, we do need to actually act on this information, keep it fun, but we now have a resp0onsiblity to react to this information we have received. But we came up with this simple idea: The press. For years and years, major news outlets would not do negative stories about Scientology because the “Church” would sue the living shit out of you. Time magazine did a cover story about them in 1991 called “A cult of greed” and immediately got sued, they eventually won everything in court, so the article stands, but they didn’t do anything else again in exposing them. Scientlology can afford to litigate any opponent to the ground. Another former foe of theirs – the Cult Awareness Network – was working on spreading news to help people get out of cults, including Scientology. But Scientology went after them, virtually bankrupting the organization. Then bought it out and now Scientologists run the site. Their premise is now that eveyone else now is a cult except Scientology. They’ve even hired some Scientology members to man the phones, so they nothing negative about Scientolgoy is allowed to go up on that site. So - Where we ended up was -- it was a simple thing: if we could get enough of the press to cover them at one time, because they thought everyone else was covering them, too, kind of a blanket thing, then, it will break that hold that Scientology has over the press, because they would not be able to fight all of them., so they wouldn’t fight any of them. There was power in our numbers and then there was power in the numbers of press who were exposing these horrible facts about Scientology.

Now at this point in time, there are anti-Scientology articles coming out every week in different publications. Some are now doing evening doing investigative series, exposing so many new details. Press are no longer scared of talking about it. Now everyone knows how insane Scientology is now.

Their numbers for new recruits are now estimated to be down around 80 percent for new recruits. In trying to get young people, especially, their success has been diminished. The awareness has saturated that age group, so it’s pretty difficult to recruit informed people. Most of Scientology’s younger members now were simply born into Scientology families. So I think we won that battle pretty easily.

Re: Court after the initial protests. They only had my name at our local protests. So I myself had to go to court because they only had my name at local protest. Some anons went into the scientology property with flyers, was a dumb move asking them to join our protests. Everyone was masked, but I was the only public name associated with it in Boston, so I was charged with criminal tresspassing, criminal harassment, and interrupting religious services. Seven months of court beginning in 08, Scientologists want to drag out legal actions as long as possible so you can’t afford to fight back, they use court system as form of harassment. What they do is they don’t care about winning, just want to wear you down. They would use delaying tactics so abusing system. At first I paid legal fees out of my pocket and through donations. Then I got a pro bono lawyer who finished the case and got me off, which was nice. I got off with a continuance without finding (CWOF). Which means, there is enough evidence to send the case to trial, the judge says. But the initial hearing was now over. I had to agree to stay away from the two Scientology buildings for one year, but had to pay no fines. Then the judge looked out at those of us assembled and asked, I don’t know which of you are the Scientolgists. Their head lawyer stood up and identified himself. He told them that they would have to also agree to stay away from ME, Gregg Housh, and they didn’t give my address, just 1,000 feet away from me, wherever I was. So I was able to protest everywhere else and was able to continue with all my online stuff, which was the most powerful anyway. I didn’t see it as any kind of a loss, they had fought for months and I could still do everything I needed to do to get things done.

And now we had gained so much knowledge from that first experience with Scientology – How to organize people, we had built up a network of people who could throw up websites in a few minutes, who had developed good press contacts, activists around the world who were willing to go to the streets. So everyone was waiting to see what we would do next.