

# The Memetic Engineering of Anonymous, the Cyberterrorist Group

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper applies the theory of memetic engineering to a cyberterrorist group: Anonymous. Anonymous was created on the Internet and is a decentralized community that has no leaders. Memetic engineering, a theoretical concept developed by Richard Dawkins (1976), posits that memes (units of cultural transmission) are diffused through cultural channels (e.g., traditional media, social networking sites, etc.) to infect minds that, in turn, will replicate those memes themselves. Memetic engineering is about memetic replication. Memes can be anything from smiley faces to evil ideas. Members of Anonymous operate in (online) disguise and have been known to transmit terrorist memes through online channels such as imageboards, chatrooms, and even YouTube videos.*

*Keywords: Anonymous, Cyberterrorism, Internet, Meme, Memetic Engineering, Terrorism*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper applies the theory of memetic engineering to a cyberterrorist group: Anonymous. Anonymous was created on the Internet and is a decentralized community that has no leaders. Memetic engineering, a theoretical concept developed by Richard Dawkins (1976), posits that memes (units of cultural transmission) are diffused through cultural channels (e.g., traditional media, social networking sites, etc.) to infect minds that, in turn, will replicate those memes themselves. Memetic engineering is

about memetic replication. Memes can be anything from smiley faces to evil ideas.

Members of Anonymous operate in (online) disguise and have been known to transmit terrorist memes through online channels such as imageboards, chatrooms, and even YouTube videos. In this analysis, the point is made that Anonymous is to be viewed as a cyberterrorist group. The leap is not far-fetched. Most of the cultural modes that are transmitted by Anonymous are reminiscent of actual terrorist groups. Anonymous members would never outright declare themselves as cyberterrorists. Yet, in a future that is greatly postmodern, with technology increasing rapidly, the authors of

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this paper provide logical arguments explaining why Anonymous is a cyberterrorist group.

This analysis begins with a description of memetic engineering, what it entails, and why it is important. The authors, then, proceed to describe (1) cyberterrorism in general (and, by the same token, distinguish it from other illegal online practices such as cybercrime), and (2) the Anonymous group itself. What comes subsequently is the heart of this paper: the analysis of the *modus operandi* of Anonymous through the theory of memetic engineering. This paper ends with a discussion that also offers suggestions for future research.

## THE THEORY OF MEMETIC ENGINEERING

Memetic engineering rests on the premise that humans communicate by using “memes.” A theoretical concept invented by Richard Dawkins (1976), a meme is an object that is culturally transmitted. Memetic engineering has to do with the diffusion of ideas or innovations. It is a way to transmit those ideas or innovations within a culture (and to other cultures as well). It is a mode of cultural transmission (Robertson, 2011). Memes pass from culture to culture and can even pass from generation to generation (Shifman, 2011; Young, 2005). An example of a meme would be a smiley face. It is culturally recognized and has been around since the 1960s. According to Matusitz (2011),

*Anyone who knows what a smiley is can copy, reproduce, or alter it and then show it to other people. A meme is any unit of information—such as an idea, concept, or movement— which one mind diffuses (verbally or by demonstration) to another mind. (p. 231)*

These ideas can be far greater than smiley faces as well. They can be anything from manifestos, theatrical productions, television shows, Fox News network, CNN, and Facebook. All of these are culturally transmitted. When memes are passed on, there is retention of some of

the ideas in those memes. To be more precise, some or all parts of the original meme must be retained for us to replicate or reproduce it in real life. Memes, then, act as replicators (Blackmore, 2000).

Mememes can be diffused in two ways: vertically or horizontally. Vertical transmission is a hierarchical transmission in which parents teach it to children or leaders teach it to followers. Horizontal transmission happens in one generation and is socially transmitted. It is cultural sharing (Arakji & Lang, 2010). In order for a meme to replicate, it needs to meet three criteria: a receptive audience, power (or strong influence), and resonance with the audience. An individual becomes a “memeoid” once he or she receives a meme and has beliefs shaped by that meme (Matusitz, 2011).

Memetic engineering is like “thought contagion” or cultural contagion (Lynch, 1998). This “thought contagion” is very much like the horizontal transmission discussed previously. With communication technologies ever increasing through online communication and social networking sites, “thought contagion” spreads rapidly. In the past, “thought contagion” would spread analogously, through discussion groups in person and through various community involvements. Now, with the onset of the digital age, the concept of community has been taken online and discussion boards are where people transmit their culture (Burman, 2012). One real world example of this is online video gaming. The Call of Duty franchise “Modern Warfare” has seen millions of users; it has become a place to transmit culture. It is no longer a place to simply play games. There is a language to the game that one must learn to understand and transmit. There is no doubt that “thought contagion” is present in the digital “Call of Duty” world. Memetic engineering is a facet of this online gameplay.

Memetic engineering’s cultural transmission has relatively few limitations to what it can reach. Just like anything is possible inside the gene pool (with humans during conception), anything is possible inside the meme pool of cultural transmission. This can make

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