

## Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality: The Communicative Constitution of *Anonymous*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines how fluid social collectives, where membership is latent, contested, or unclear, achieve ‘organizationality’, that is, how they achieve organizational identity and actorhood. Drawing on the “communicative constitution of organizations” perspective, we argue that the organizationality of a social collective is accomplished through ‘identity claims’ – i.e., speech acts that concern what the social collective is or does – and negotiations on whether or not these claims have been made on the collective’s behalf. We empirically examine the case of the hacker collective *Anonymous* and analyse relevant identity claims to investigate two critical episodes in which the organizationality of *Anonymous* was contested. Our study contributes to organization studies by showing that fluid social collectives are able to temporarily reinstate organizational actorhood through the performance of carefully prepared and staged identity claims.

**Keywords:** anonymous, communicative constitution of organizations, fluidity, identity claim analysis, organizationality, organizational identity

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars have observed the emergence of diverse forms of organizing that deviate from formal organizations in that they resemble looser social collectives. Such collectives include online communities (Garud et al., 2008; O’Mahony and Ferraro, 2007; Puranam et al., 2014), hacker collectives (Coleman, 2014; Scott, 2013), and terrorist networks (Comas et al., 2015; Schoeneborn and Scherer, 2012; Stohl and Stohl, 2011). These forms of organizing have in common that they tend to be ‘fluid’ in the sense

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that membership is contested or unclear and their boundaries are open or permeable (see also Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010). However, the fluidity of these forms of organizing challenge classic assumptions of what an organization is. For instance, traditionally (e.g., March and Simon, 1958), organizations 'are simply not conceivable without reference to workable identities and boundaries' (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010, p. 1253). These works, however, tend to overlook that even highly fluid forms of organizing can nevertheless gain the status of organizational entities and actors (see King et al., 2010). Other scholars, in view of such developments, have suggested that the notion of organization should be broadened to include also looser, networked, and 'boundaryless' social arrangements (e.g., Ashkenas et al., 2002) and that organizations should be conceived not as static entities but as ongoing processes of 'becoming' (e.g., Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). In turn, those works can be criticized for failing to distinguish organizations from other social collectives, such as communities, networks, or movements (see also Sillince, 2010).

In this paper, we argue that the notion of organization remains useful nevertheless to comprehend fluid social collectives of various kinds (see also Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014). We propose to use the term 'organizationality' that allows us to switch from the binary classification of social collectives as either organizations or non-organizations to a more gradual differentiation. Organizationality depends on the degree to which social collectives fulfill the minimum criteria of what constitutes an organization (see also Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011). Our notion of organizationality draws on the idea that social collectives are 'organizational' on the basis of three criteria: first, they are characterized by interconnected instances of decision-making (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011); second, these instances of decision-making are attributed to a collective entity or actor (King et al., 2010); third, collective identity is accomplished through speech acts that aim to delineate what the entity or actor is or does ('identity claims'; see Bartel and Dutton, 2001).

This conceptualization emphasizes that the formation of collective identity (see Gioia et al., 2013; Hardy et al., 2005; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) is a key component of organizationality, especially (but not only) in fluid social arrangements. From a processual perspective, organizational identity has been defined as 'articulated claims emerging from interaction among leaders, employees, and other stakeholders [...] regarding who they are, or who they are becoming, as an organization' (Schultz and Hernes, 2013, p. 2). We extend works that rest on processual (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) or language-centered (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Hardy et al., 2005) notions of organizational identity by emphasizing the fundamental and formative role of identity claims in the communicative constitution of social collectives *as* organizational entities or actors (see also Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Koschmann, 2013). In this regard, our study speaks to a larger stream of research that emphasizes the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Brummans et al., 2014;).

Based on these considerations, we aim to shed light on how identity claims contribute to the communicative constitution of fluid social collectives as organizational actors. Investigating the contingent and precarious accomplishment of organizational actorhood is important for understanding how loose social collectives persist despite their inherent fluidity (see also Schoeneborn and Scherer, 2012). To empirically explore the research question of how fluid social collectives accomplish organizationality, we

conducted a case study of the hacktivist (i.e., hacker activist) collective Anonymous. Anonymous can serve as a prime example of organizational fluidity because the collective lacks formal membership; instead, it relies on a latent pool of supporters who tend to remain anonymous to both other insiders and outsiders (Scott, 2013; Coleman, 2014). Our case study reconstructs the genesis of hacker operations as communicative episodes that contribute to the collective's organizationality. Specifically, by drawing on the method of 'identity-claim analysis' (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Vaast et al., 2013), we examine which types of speech acts make it possible to settle ongoing debates on what Anonymous is or does. In the two episodes that we examined in more detail, contestations persisted and escalated until carefully prepared and 'staged' identity claims led to at least provisional closure of the debate by settling the questions and doubts that had been raised and thus ensuring the status of organizational actorhood.

The contribution of our paper is twofold: first, we offer an answer to the research question of how fluid social collectives accomplish organizationality. As our study of the Anonymous case shows, even if social collectives are fluid in the sense of having unclear membership, they can activate organizational actorhood at least temporarily through carefully prepared and staged performances of identity claims. However, we presume that these practices of reinstating organizational actorhood may also apply in more conventional organizational settings that exhibit high levels of fluidity—for instance, during periods of radical change or transformation (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli and Tushman, 1994). Second, we add to previous research on organizational identity (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), and language-centered studies in particular (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2005; Hardy et al., 2005), by elucidating the performative role of identity claims in communicatively creating organizational phenomena in the first place.

## FLUIDITY AND ORGANIZATIONALITY

Over the past two decades, scholars have observed the emergence of diverse new forms of organizing that deviate from formal organizations in that they resemble looser, more flexible, and more fluid social collectives (e.g., O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007; Puranam et al., 2014). This trend towards organizational 'fluidity' (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010) or 'liquidity' (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014) needs to be seen in the larger context of general societal developments: First, new digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as open source software, wikis, and social media, make new forms of organizing possible that are characterized by virtual, loose, and/or anonymous collaboration (e.g., Puranam et al., 2014). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) observed that new ICTs enable loose forms of organizing that are held together by what they call the 'logic of connective action'. Second, in today's 'network society' (Castells, 2013), organizational boundaries tend to become increasingly blurred, for instance, in inter-organizational networks (Koschmann et al., 2012) or other hybrid arrangements (Ciesielska, 2010) that also allow third parties to become increasingly involved in the organizational endeavour (Schultz et al., 2013). Third, the prevalence of multi-optional career paths and the increasing importance of mergers and acquisitions, outsourcing, or temporary contract work (Walsh and Deery, 2006) have made individual commitment

to organizations more flexible and dynamic. Thus, even well-established, conventional forms of organization such as state bureaucracies may exhibit high levels of fluidity, at least during periods of radical change or restructuring (Gersick, 1991; or Romanelli and Tushman, 1994, describe such periods as ‘punctuations’).

In the light of these considerations, it comes as no surprise that scholars have started to proclaim the end of the organization as we know it. For instance, Ashkenas et al. (2002) coined the term ‘boundaryless organization’, provocatively questioning classical notions of formal organization as systems of rules, membership, and hierarchies (e.g., March and Simon, 1958). Similarly, Shirky (2008) described ‘the power of organizing without organizations’ by drawing on examples of online collaborative platforms that enable individual actors to jointly create value without the necessity of relying on a formal, institutionalized organization. While these two prominent examples originate from practitioner-oriented works, their rejection of formal notions of organization corresponds with larger streams of organization theory that have put forth an alternative ontology of ‘becoming’. In these studies, the status and boundaries of organizations are regarded as questionable and organizations are perceived as inherently precarious and processual phenomena that need to be continuously re-accomplished over time (e.g., Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Hernes, 2014).

However, the idea that organizational phenomena are becoming increasingly fluid shakes the very foundations of organization theory (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010). If organizations tend to become indistinguishable from other social collectives, such as communities, networks, or movements (Sillince, 2010), one may ask whether it makes sense to use the label ‘organization’ at all. Nevertheless, scholars have defended the heuristic value of the concept of organization and to apply it in order to comprehend loose and fluid social collectives (see, for example, Garud et al., 2008; Puranam et al., 2014), as long as certain criteria are fulfilled that justify the attribution of the status of organization (what we call ‘organizationality’). In this paper, we define organizationality as the degree to which a social collective displays three characteristics of organization: (1) interconnected instances of decision-making, (2) actorhood, and (3) identity. We have derived these three criteria from recent works in organization theory that are concerned with the minimum conditions that must be satisfied for an entity to be classified as an organization (see Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011; King et al., 2010). We argue that each of these criteria is necessary but none of them is sufficient in itself for organizationality to arise. One can imagine a series of interconnected processes of decision-making such as ad-hoc forms of organizing – for instance, an eruption of collective outrage in social media against a corporation (Castells, 2013) – that do not necessarily involve organizational actorhood or the stabilization of organizational identity. However, in turn, organizational actorhood cannot emerge in the absence of underlying decision-making processes. In the following, we will briefly specify the three criteria of organizationality in more detail.

### **Interconnected Decision-Making**

Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) put forth a minimum definition of organizations as ‘decided orders’. In their view, an organization persists as long as interconnected episodes of

decision-making take place on behalf of a collective (see also Luhmann, 2003). The authors propose the term 'partial organization' to signify social phenomena that represent 'decided orders' but lack one or more of the typical elements of full-fledged organizations, such as formal membership or hierarchical structures. In effect, Ahrne and Brunsson's conceptualization (2011) leads to a widened understanding of what an organization is, thus transcending the classic requirement of formal membership for an organization to arise (March and Simon, 1958). However, as emphasized above, it is perfectly possible that an emergent network of interconnected decisions, such as a bunch of friends helping each other move (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009), does not form an organizational entity. For that reason, we argue that in order to define organizationality it is necessary to consider a second and fundamental feature, in a next step.

### **Actorhood**

King et al. (2010) suggest that collective actorhood should be perceived as *the* distinct feature of organizations, if compared to other social phenomena: 'Markets, communities, and organizations may all be different forms of collective behavior, but what comparatively differentiates the organization is that neither markets nor communities are commonly viewed as actors' (p. 297). The authors go on to argue that organizational actorhood relies on (communicative) processes of external attribution: 'organizations must be attributed as capable of acting by other actors, especially by their primary stakeholders and audiences. [...] Organizations are actors because society, not only legally but also *practically and linguistically*, grants them that status' (King et al., 2010, p. 292; emphasis added). These external attribution processes, in turn, require that a social entity is identifiable and 'addressable' (Drepper, 2005, p. 180) in the first place. This directly leads us to the third feature of organizationality.

### **Identity and Boundary**

King et al. (2010, p. 295) link their theoretical considerations closely to collective identity as an important source of attributed actorhood:

[I]dentity creates a set of expectations about appropriate behavior for a particular organization. As identity claims become expressed as institutionalized mission statements, policies, and routines, they operate as the organization's social context, providing members and informed outsiders with a common set of phenomenological points of reference that guide consequential deliberation and organizational decision making.

This quote is in line with the considerations by Schreyögg and Sydow (2010), who argued that any kind of organization, from the most stable to the most fluid, requires some form of identity and boundary that bind together the social collective. Organizations tend to differ, however, from other social collectives in that they play a more proactive role in the formation of identity: 'whereas communities derive their identity from the collective identity of their members, organizations imprint their identities on members' (King et al., 2010, p. 298).

In sum, social collectives become ‘organizational’ when instances of decision-making become interconnected and are attributed to a collective actor. This, however, is only made possible through the continuous demarcation and negotiation of organizational identity (i.e., communicative claims on what the organization is and what it is not). We expect that the pivotal role of identity for the accomplishment of organizationality is particularly prevalent in fluid social arrangements that lack formal membership or hierarchies and thus cannot ensure collaboration (for a similar argument, see Hardy et al., 2005, p. 63). In the next step of our inquiry, we will review the extant literature on organizational identity with regard to our research question of how fluid social collectives accomplish and maintain organizationality.

## FLUIDITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

The interest in the fluidity of social collectives corresponds with recent developments in the literature on identity, according to which organizational identities are inherently precarious and fluid in character (e.g., Hardy et al., 2005; Gioia et al., 2013). In an overview article, Gioia et al. (2013, p. 131) argued that the attention of scholars has recently shifted from an *essentialist* notion of identity, according to which identity is perceived as a ‘thing’ (e.g., Albert and Whetten, 1985), towards a *processual* view of identity as an ongoing accomplishment (e.g., Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Scholars who work in the latter tradition are interested in the emergent character of organizational identity, arguing that identity needs to be recurrently evoked and maintained through ‘performances’ (e.g., Bartel and Dutton, 2001, p. 120). This is especially pronounced in works that focus on the role of language use in the formation of organizational identity. Collectively, these works form a rich and vivid body of research that centres on concepts such as communication (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Koschmann, 2013), discourses (e.g., Hardy et al., 2005; Bragd et al., 2008), or narratives (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2005; Chreim, 2005; Brown, 2006).

These language-centred works have advanced the study of organizational identity in at least three respects. First, they have shifted scholarly attention to actual instances and performances of language use as the main site at which the organizational identity is formed. As Hardy et al. (2005, p. 62) assert, ‘our focus is on collective identity as a linguistically produced object embodied in talk and other forms of text, rather than as a set of beliefs produced in members’ minds’. In turn, shifting the unit of analysis from the cognitive to the communicative level enables researchers to account better for the inherent dynamics of identity formation (Cheney and Christensen, 2001).

Second, language-centred works have provided us with explanations on *why* organizational identity is typically subject to the dynamics of continuous change (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Chreim, 2005; Brown, 2006; Brown and Humphreys, 2006). Brown and Humphreys (2006, p. 234) suggested that organizations should be grasped as ‘politicized arenas’ where multiple organizational identities tend to co-exist and potentially compete with each other. The authors further suggested that organizational identities ‘are constituted by the multiple, changing, and occasionally consonant, sometimes overlapping, but often competing narratives’ (Brown et al., 2005, p. 314); in other words, dominant identity narratives tend to emerge from continuous contestations and negotiations

between social actors about what the organization is or should be (Brown, 2006; Rodrigues and Child, 2008).

Third, crucially, scholars have started questioning whether the formation of identity occurs solely in the context of interactions among organizational members, i.e., 'insiders', stressing that it can also involve external parties, i.e., 'outsiders' (e.g., Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Coupland and Brown, 2004; Kjaergaard et al., 2011). These views ultimately call into question whether organizations have clear-cut boundaries at all. Cheney and Christensen (2001) especially related these arguments to fluid social collectives, such as networked forms of organization, where identity is challenged by the difficulty of distinguishing between the inside and outside of the organizational endeavour. Accordingly, we expect that the formation and stabilization of identity is particularly at stake in social collectives where the status of membership is unclear or in flux (see also Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Fayard and DeSanctis, 2010).

While studies that are based on a language-centred perspective have indeed shed light on the dynamic formation of organizational identity, they are not fully able to provide satisfying answers to the question of how fluid social collectives achieve organizationality. While there is a pertinent strand of the literature that deals with the communicative formation of identity of fluid social collectives, such as online communities (e.g., Fayard and DeSanctis, 2010) or social movements (e.g., McDonald, 2002), these studies are usually not concerned with examining the role of identity in the constitution of these social collectives *as* organizational actors, which is our main concern. Another body of language-centred studies that are rooted in the tradition of population ecology (e.g., Hsu and Hannan, 2005; Fiol and Romanelli, 2012) discerns a close connection between questions of identity and the constitution of organizational actors or actor categories (see also Vergne and Wry, 2014). However, these studies tend to focus on a different level of analysis: they examine how 'cognitive categories [are] used by audiences to understand and classify organizations as members of one organizational population over others' (Fiol and Romanelli, 2012, p. 597). Hence, we argue that these studies are limited in their ability to answer the research question of how the organizationality of one particular social collective is accomplished in fluid settings even in the absence of a larger category of actors. Instead, we believe that studies centring on the role of discourse and narratives in the formation of organizational identity provide the comparably best platform for understanding how fluidity, identity, and organizationality interrelate. In fact, some of these studies (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2005; Hardy et al., 2005) explicitly consider the constitutive and formative role of communication for organizational phenomena. For instance, Coupland and Brown (2004, p. 1328) understand organizations as 'linguistic social constructions, and organization [as] a processual and emergent phenomenon'. Most of these works, however, use the idea of the communicative constitution of organizations merely as a baseline premise (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Hardy et al., 2005). In contrast, our study aims to unpack further this assumption by showing *how* identity claims contribute to the communicative constitution of organizations as actors. In the next step of our inquiry, we propose to turn to a recent stream of organization theory that allows us to explicitly address this issue.

## **A CONSTITUTIVE COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE ON FLUIDITY, IDENTITY, AND ORGANIZATIONALITY**

In this paper, we will examine how organizationality is accomplished in fluid settings by drawing on a theoretical perspective that is known as the ‘communicative constitution of organizations’ (CCO) perspective (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Brummans et al., 2014). Proponents of this approach define communication as the dynamic ‘process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings, which are axial – not peripheral – to organizational existence and organizing phenomena’ (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 22). The main idea underlying the CCO perspective is that organizations are not primarily comprised of their members or job roles but come into existence through the continuous layering of conversations and texts that become constantly interconnected and collectively evoke and stabilize the organization as an identifiable entity or actor (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, 2011; Cooren, 2010). The CCO perspective is deeply rooted in speech act theory in the tradition of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), emphasizing that language use is performative in the sense that it not only represents but also fundamentally (co-)creates social reality (e.g., Taylor and Cooren, 1997).

Recent studies following the CCO perspective have closely linked the question of how organizations are communicatively constituted to the issue of identity formation (e.g., Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Koschmann, 2013): ‘Depending on the connections that individuals make while communicating’, as Christensen and Cornelissen assert, ‘the organization and its identity [are] constructed rather than antecedently given’ (2011, pp. 405–406). More generally, we argue that the CCO perspective (e.g., Taylor and Cooren, 1997; Bencherki and Cooren, 2011) is ultimately a communicative theory of identity and organizationality (see also Cooren et al., 2011, pp. 1158–1159; Nicotera, 2013, pp. 68–70).

According to CCO scholars Bencherki and Cooren (2011), the organizational character of a social collective is accomplished through the combined communicative processes of ‘attribution’ and ‘appropriation’. First, the communicative constitution of organizationality requires the performance of speech acts that attribute actorhood and identity to a collective (King et al., 2010). These ‘attribution’ processes may occur in the form of communication exclusively among organizational members or among internal and external actors. In other words, literally anybody can contribute to the organizational endeavour, as long as a certain practice (e.g., a hacker attack) is executed on behalf of, or at least attributed to, the organization as a ‘social address’ (Drepper, 2005, p. 180). Second, according to Bencherki and Cooren (2011), organizational phenomena are further stabilized through communicative processes of ‘appropriation’. In effect, the communicatively constructed organizational address starts to be populated by and to ‘possess’ the very speech acts that have been executed on its behalf, thus reinforcing the construction of collective actorhood (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011, p. 1580). Ultimately, in this view, one can imagine organizations as phenomena that arise through communication and are comprised not of individual members but of acts of communication.

In order to comprehend better the radical turn in perspective that CCO scholars propose, it is important to look at the role of organizational membership in the



communicative constitution of organizations. McPhee and Zaug (2009) characterized 'membership negotiation' (i.e., interactions that demarcate a communicative boundary between the inclusion and exclusion of organizational members) as a key communicative practice that constitutes organizational phenomena. In this view, however, it is not the individual member but the communicative process of membership negotiation as such that belongs to (or is possessed by) the organization. It follows that also the organizational boundary is imagined here as inherently communicative and precarious in character (Schoeneborn, 2011, p. 679).

If organizational membership is subject to continuous contestation, the question of which speech acts can be executed on behalf of a collective, and thus of who is authorized to speak for a collective, becomes even more salient: 'such an "authority" is fragile [...] In a communicational interpretation of organization [...] there is no constant point of stability; the authority to speak for the collectivity must be endlessly renewed, in the performance of the acts of speech' (Taylor and Cooren, 1997, pp. 434–435). In this regard, the notion of 'membership negotiation', as CCO scholars describe it (McPhee and Zaug, 2009), can be linked fruitfully to what is known as 'identity claims' in the literature on identity (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Vaast et al., 2013). 'Identity claims' are speech acts that address what an organization is or does. As Bartel and Dutton (2001, p. 121) emphasize, however, identity claims do not work on the basis of their performance alone, but instead require affirmation and validation by other speech acts in order to become effective.

In our reading of the CCO perspective (e.g., McPhee and Zaug, 2009), membership negotiations in the form of identity claims are key for explaining how organizational phenomena are constituted and organizationality is accomplished. In line with studies as diverse as Glynn's (2000) on symphony orchestras, or Ran and Duimering's (2007) on mission statements, we expect that identity claims are important for various kinds of organizational endeavours, from rudimentary to highly established ones. We furthermore hypothesize that the necessity of performing identity claims is particularly pronounced in the context of fluid social collectives for two main reasons:

First, the more uncertain the membership status of other individual actors in a fluid social collective, the stronger the emphasis on the actual performance of the identity claim itself. In this context, we expect that identity claims can effectively demarcate a boundary between inclusion and exclusion (McPhee and Zaug, 2009) and ensure organizationality especially when they have a 'declarative' character. Generally, declarative speech acts performatively change reality when being uttered (e.g., a wedding vow), while assertive speech acts merely claim the factual accuracy of a statement (e.g. describing a couple as 'married'). We label an identity claim as 'declarative' when the utterance as such performs a deed – for instance, by effectively expelling his or her membership through revelations of compromising information (see Bartel and Dutton, 2001). As Austin (1962) reminds us, the 'success' of such declarative speech acts ultimately depends on what he calls 'felicity conditions'; that is, on the extent to which an utterance is in line with institutionalized expectations and conventions in a given social setting. For instance, Salih (2002), in her work on Judith Butler, gives the example of a priest who pronounces his teddy bears man and wife before going to bed. However, this utterance will fail because it violates its own felicity conditions, as 'there is no convention

permitting the marriage of teddies so that, even though the priest is authorized to perform marriages, his words will have no binding force when uttered in the privacy of his bedroom' (Salih, 2002, p. 100).

This leads us to a second important reason for assuming that identity claims play an important role especially in fluid organizational arrangements. Given that a speech act's performative power does not lie in the utterance alone (e.g., its assertive or declarative character), we expect that in fluid organizational arrangements the need to carefully craft, prepare, and 'stage' identity claims is intensified. More specifically, in fluid social collectives where membership is unclear, expectations are less institutionalized, if at all, and where there are few anchor points to orientate actors, we expect that identity claims will be validated and affirmed by grounding them in materiality (what Bartel and Dutton, 2001, p. 125, refer to as practices of 'equipping'). Substituting 'felicity conditions' can be achieved by binding identity claims to actual physical objects (artifacts), sites (such as well-established channels of communication), or bodies (i.e., identifiable human individuals) (see Ashcraft et al., 2009). To examine how identity claims contribute to accomplishing organizationality of fluid social collectives, we will now turn to our empirical case study on the hacker collective Anonymous.

## CASE SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION

### Case Selection

Anonymous is an organized group of hackers who conceal their personal identity and engage in collective actions of a political or non-political nature, such as hacking websites or participating in street protests. The affirmative and partly political stance towards 'hacking' places Anonymous among communities and organizational collectives that propagate free (usually 'open source') software, access to knowledge, and Internet freedom more generally (see Coleman, 2013b). Anonymous activists, also known as 'Anons', tend to describe their organization as a collective or hive. The hacker collective Anonymous seems to exhibit at least two important features of organizationality: first, Anons engage in collaborative episodes of organizing and decision-making – for example, in the form of online protests and website hacks that they refer to as 'operations' (Coleman, 2013a). Second, external observers, such as journalists, when referring to episodic operations tend to assign collective actorhood (King et al., 2010) not to individual hackers but to Anonymous as an organizational entity.

Our rationale for choosing Anonymous as a case in the context of our theoretical inquiry is that it represents a pronounced example of fluid social collectives, especially with respect to fluid membership. In the case of Anonymous, boundaries are permeable in the sense that hackers can contribute to the organizational endeavour and its operations without being formal members. The fluid or latent character of membership is further intensified by the fact that the identity of individual Anonymous members is deliberately hidden behind avatars or pseudonyms (see also Jemielniak, 2014). Thus, self-declared members remain unknown, often even among each other (Olson, 2012; Coleman, 2013a).

## History and Organizational Characteristics of Anonymous

The following description of the history and characteristics of Anonymous mainly relies on the ethnographic research conducted by Coleman (2013a, 2014) and the investigative research of journalists such as Olson (2012). We have also drawn on our data from open-ended, narrative interviews (Kvale, 2008) that we conducted in English or German with 11 interview partners. The interviews involved five hackers who consider themselves 'members' of Anonymous plus four academic researchers and two investigative journalists who specialize on hackers and hacktivism. The self-declared Anonymous members participated in two face-to-face interviews lasting 120 and 180 minutes respectively. In order to cross-check the accuracy of the information provided and the authenticity of the interviewees who described themselves as members of Anonymous, we pursued a dual course of action. First, we recruited the five interviewees who presented themselves as members of Anonymous via different entry points in an effort to cover various branches of the hacker collective. A prominent European journalist, for instance, served as a trusted intermediary. This gave these interviewees a sense of reassurance and helped them overcome their initial skepticism. Second, we spoke to academic researchers and journalists who had extensively studied Anonymous. The purpose of this second set of interviews was to enrich and cross-validate our contextual understanding of the Anonymous case.

Anonymous initially emerged around 2006 on the public online image board '4chan.org' or, more precisely, on the random board '/b/', which has a no-rules policy. Users are not required to log in on image boards and can post pictures or links to other online content; the default user name is 'Anonymous'. Random board/b/allows only a limited number of threads at any one time and new threads replace old ones, which means that all new threads disappear after four to six hours on average. The first collective activities, such as invading other online forums (Coleman, 2014; Olson, 2012), were conducted merely for 'lulz' (i.e., just for the fun of it), a term which began as a plural variant of 'lol' (i.e., a short form of 'lots of laughs' or 'laughing out loud'). On the whole, early Anonymous activities mainly resembled practical jokes in that they were anarchic, without any political message, and primarily intended to shock and irritate the users of a hacked website.

The non-political motivation for collective Anonymous activities changed when operation 'Chanology' was launched in 2008 (Coleman, 2014). Prior to this, anyone who brought up political issues on 4chan was derided as a 'moralfag'. Homophobic language is not uncommon on 4chan – actually, everyone on 4chan is called a 'fag': newbies are 'newfags', experienced users are 'oldfags'. In January 2008, someone posted on YouTube a call for action against the censorship practices of the religious sect Scientology, which often sued critics and whistleblowers in an attempt to silence them. This resulted in a series of online protests and, for the first time, also offline protests by hacktivists against Scientology (Coleman, 2013a). In our interviews, one self-declared Anonymous member described the foundational role of these protests by referring to project Chanology as a 'legacy project' for his own group of Anons.

The first wave of political protests in which Anonymous members participated transformed what had started as an anarchic assemblage of people into an increasingly organized collective of 'moralfags' concerned mainly with preserving Internet freedom

by means of hacking operations. Many of these more political operations still originated on public image boards such as 4chan or publicly accessible editing pads. Individuals who engage in acts that prove successful and gain the approval of Anonymous members may be invited into private chat rooms, as one self-declared member of Anonymous explained to us in an interview (translated from German):

There are invitations. For instance, someone posts an idea for an operation on Krautchan [a German spin-off from 4Chan], then you look at what he's posting for some time and then we decide by simple majority. Personally, I often think this is silly – because you can recognize this mechanism from outside. I too joined in that way.

The number of political activities attributed to Anonymous continued to increase during the Arab Spring in early 2011 (Coleman, 2014) and national branches of Anonymous began to emerge around the same time. Initially, these groups mostly focused on local targets, a trait that again highlights the centreless nature of this organizational endeavour.

In most Anonymous operations, media coverage plays a key role in drawing attention to an operation even before it is executed, as one of our interviewees, a journalist, explained: 'Everybody is kind of complicit in it because the journalists like myself, the news media, people who write online, we know these kinds of stories generate a lot of page views, generate a lot of interest'. At the same time, media coverage also seems to create expectations and thus puts pressure on Anonymous to act on their threats. One of the self-declared Anonymous members we interviewed complained that, because the 'media always said "these are hackers", more and more wannabe hackers joined Anonymous'.

Renouncing unpopular or unsuccessful acts is a common tactic for regaining control over defining what Anonymous is or does, as one interviewee explained: 'When an operation is cool, we claim authorship even if we weren't responsible; in the case of a bad operation, it's the other way round'. In a similar vein, Anonymous members may target 'errant' individuals by exposing their identity, as we learned from one of our interviewees: 'We have a word for revealing the personal identity of a former Anonymous member called "doxing", derived from publishing documents'. Both these tactics – renouncing authorship and doxing other members – are part of the repertoire of communicative practices that Anons employed also in the two critical episodes that we empirically investigated in more detail through an identity-claim analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Methodological Approach**

Our empirical study tackles the question of how fluid social collectives accomplish organizationality, when membership is contested or unclear and organizational boundaries are open or permeable. Based on the foundational assumption of a communicative constitution of organizations and identities (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Koschmann, 2013), we argue that organizational identity is accomplished through speech acts that attribute actorhood to a social collective (see also Bencherki and Cooren, 2011). The methodology of our empirical study is guided by a 'communicational ontology' of organization,

which is characterized as ‘an invitation to start from communication in order to explain organization and organizing and not the other way around’ (Cooren, 2012, p. 4). In epistemological terms, this position implies that researchers should primarily study the meaning negotiation and construction processes that take place on the ‘terra firma’ of communicative interactions (see Cooren et al., 2011) – as the primary site on which social phenomena, including organizations, are constituted. Accordingly, in our study we follow scholars who tend to draw on established qualitative empirical methods, such as conversation analysis or speech-act analysis, with the aim of ‘revealing’ the communicative constitution of organizations through the actual performance of certain utterances (for an overview, see Cooren, 2015). This approach puts a strong emphasis on the researcher’s abilities to understand communicative interactions in the context of their occurrence (see also Goodwin and Heritage, 1990). We enrich the CCO perspective’s range of methods by employing a specific type of speech-act analysis – namely, identity-claim analysis (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Vaast et al., 2013) – to study the communicative constitution of organizationality in the case of Anonymous.

### **Data Collection**

We collected data on communicative interactions in the context of Anonymous on three levels: (1) communicative episodes, (2) communicative events, and (3) speech acts (i.e., identity claims). On the first level, communicative episodes can be defined as sequences of language use in either verbal or written form that involve at least two individuals and allow for the mutual negotiation of meaning over extended periods of time (Blaschke et al., 2012). A communicative episode is held together by the common theme or issue around which it revolves. In the case of Anonymous, a communicative episode is typically a certain hacker operation that is signified by a distinct label (e.g., ‘#OpWestboro’ or ‘#OpFacebook’). Each episode, in turn, consists of a series of communicative events, which we consider on the second level of our analysis.

Communicative events are specific and distinct incidents of language use that are bound to a spatio-temporal context (Vasquez and Cooren, 2013). As such, communicative events are ‘segment[s] of an ongoing and situated stream of socio-discursive practice’ (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1151). Communicative events comprise series of utterances that directly relate to each other. For example, an e-mail correspondence on a certain topic typically consists of sequences of utterances (Blaschke et al., 2012). In the case of Anonymous, communicative events include, for instance, press releases, media articles, or Twitter conversations.

The third level consists of speech acts that occur within a communicative event. Our research focuses on speech acts that are commonly referred to as ‘identity claims’; that is, utterances that explicitly or implicitly delineate what an organization is or does or what it is not or what it does not do (see Glynn, 2000; Ran and Duimering, 2007; Vaast et al., 2013). As Glynn (2000, p. 286) points out, such claims represent ‘a rhetorical activity, typically conducted by a group of social actors to persuade an audience’.

In the following, we explain how we went about collecting our data on each level. On the first level, and in order to gain an overview of communicative episodes related to Anonymous, we compiled a list of Anonymous operations mentioned in the two largest

language versions (English and German) of Wikipedia (2013a, 2013b). These lists are more comprehensive than other histories of Anonymous in terms of numbers of operations (see Olson, 2012; Coleman, 2013a). Our consolidated list proved to be reliable when we cross-checked media articles that were listed as references in Wikipedia (2013a, 2013b). This procedure allowed us to identify 111 operations in total that took place between October 2006 and May 2013.

On the basis of selected media articles, we assessed whether the attribution of those operations to Anonymous was in any way disputed or unclear. Specifically, we looked for reports of contradictory statements that either claimed or denied responsibility for a certain operation. We then singled out for closer investigation episodes where the involvement of Anonymous was contested, because seen from our theoretical viewpoint it is on such occasions that a fluid social collective reinstates organizationality through communication. This procedure led us to identify eight operations where the attribution of communicative events to Anonymous as an organizational actor was in doubt at least to some degree. Table I provides an overview of the incidents of contested involvement.

We then focused on these eight cases by collecting material such as press reports, posts, and conversations on Twitter, in addition to material from the academic literature (e.g., Coleman, 2013a, 2014). Having compiled a separate dossier for each episode, we selected two communicative episodes for a more detailed analysis: Operation Westboro and Operation Facebook. We chose these two episodes because they both involved the public contestation of identity claims. Moreover, each episode stretched over an extended period, thus allowing us to study the process of negotiations revolving around identity claims.

On the second level of our data collection, and in order to identify the signatory communicative events that collectively constituted the specific Anonymous operation (i.e., the communicative episode) and the respective processes of identity negotiation, we expanded our dossiers on the two selected hacker operations. We began with a simple Google search for media outlets that reported at least three times either of these two episodes and cited pertinent sources or channels attributed to Anonymous (e.g., the website AnonNews.org and certain Twitter accounts). The articles we found on Google served as a starting point for tracking communication about the respective operation back to its origins; that is, back to that operation's first public mention. In that manner, we traced those references to the communication channels through which they had emerged – for example, Twitter feeds such as @AnonOps and @YourAnonNews or specific websites. The origin of Operation Westboro was a press release on AnonNews.org, while the origin of Operation Facebook was a website that allows public, multi-author editing (PiratePad).

Next, we compiled a chronology of the communication events that had taken place. We determined which ones to include based on whether other communication events later in the episode referred to a specific event – for example, we checked for mentions of that event in a media article or in a tweet (i.e., a Twitter posting). Our list of communicative events, however, does not include data from private or hidden communication channels (e.g., private mail correspondence or Internet Relay Chat, known as IRC), though many of our Anonymous interviewees considered them to be important for planning operations (see also Coleman, 2013a, 2014). This, of course, is a limitation of our

Table I. Communicative episodes with unclear or disputed attribution to Anonymous

<i>Date</i>	<i>Episode</i>	<i>Practices</i>	<i>Why unclear?</i>
Feb. 2011	Operation Westboro	Anonymous supposedly wrote an open letter to the Westboro Baptist Church.	Anonymous subsequently denied the authenticity of the threat, suggesting that someone from outside Anonymous had made the posting.
May 2011	Operation Reasonable Reaction	Pro-Gaddafi hacks.	Anonymous were divided on the 2011 Libyan civil war.
July 2011	Austrian Greens	Hacked website and copied the data of 13,000 users.	Anon.Austria claimed that they did not start the hack.
Aug. 2011	Operation Facebook (Part I)	According to the links on the post, Anonymous would take down Facebook on November 5, 2011.	Anonymous tweeted that they never announced Operation Facebook and that this was some guy's idea of a joke.
Nov. 2011	Operation Facebook (Part II)	Anonymous exposed the initiator of Operation Facebook.	Exposed individual continued to say it was an Anonymous operation.
Dec. 2011	Attack on the security firm Stratfor	Thousands of e-mail addresses and credit card information stolen from Stratfor.	Anonymous put out a press release stating 'This hack is most definitely not the work of Anonymous'.
Mar. 2012	Symantec source code leak	Leak of Norton Antivirus 2006 software source code.	Attribution to Anonymous unclear; Symantec claimed they had been blackmailed.
Sept. 2012	Apple unique device identifier (UDID) leak	Claim that 12 million Apple UDIDs had been stolen from the laptop of an FBI agent; claim later refuted.	Maybe a hoax; owner of data came out and credibly dismissed the FBI story.

study, because our approach does not fully capture the entire range of communicative events (including 'backstage' conversations) that may have significantly contributed to the constitution of Anonymous' organizational identity in the cases we examined.

We confined our analysis to publicly available communication for two reasons: first, for many of its operations, the hacker collective seems to rely on an anonymous, latent, and geographically dispersed base of supporters that can be reached primarily via publicly visible media such as Twitter, Facebook, or the press. Second, as we learned through our interviews, publicly accessible communication channels serve as a significant means of recruiting new 'members', who are invited to join private IRC channels later on. However, in the same context, it is important to note that our data do not allow us to derive conclusions as to the 'true' nature or identity of Anonymous (to look 'behind the mask', so to speak). What our study allows us to show instead is how communicative identity claims attribute actorhood to a social collective and thus contribute to the constitution of its organizational identity (see also King et al., 2010; Bencherki and Cooren, 2011). At the same time, our theoretical perspective implies that also we as researchers do not merely describe but performatively co-contribute to the communicative construction of the social phenomena we are investigating.

### **Data Analysis**

Our data collection on the first and second levels provided us with an empirical basis for investigating in more detail the communicative relationship between organizational identity and identity construction on the third level. More specifically, we analyzed a particular type of individual speech act that concerns what a social collective is or does (i.e., identity claims). In recent years, the method of 'identity-claim analysis' has become an increasingly common approach to investigating empirically the formation of collective or organizational identity (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Whetten and Mackey, 2002; Ran and Duijmering, 2007). For instance, Bartel and Dutton (2001) used identity-claim analysis to explain how individuals whose membership status is ambiguous try to resolve this ambiguity. Similarly, Vaast et al. (2013) examined how identity claims can lead to the emergence and legitimation of new categories of actors. These examples illustrate that analyzing identity claims can be particularly helpful in the study of fluid social collectives such as Anonymous, where organizational identities are contested, boundaries are ambiguous, and actorhood is in doubt.

The procedure we used to identify the speech acts that represented identity claims was based on our chronology of communication events for Operation Westboro and Operation Facebook and involved three steps. First, like Vaast et al. (2013), who studied identity claims in connection with emerging actor categories, we selected as identity claims those statements that concerned what Anonymous generally is or is not and does or does not do; in other words, we focused on 'those statements that emphasized the identity, image, or character' (Glynn, 2000, p. 288) of Anonymous. More specifically, we classified as identity claims only those statements that referred to Anonymous as the referent or 'social address' (Drepper, 2005). This included statements made by self-declared members of Anonymous (e.g., the statement 'we exist without nationality') or by third parties such as media outlets (e.g., an article that referred to Anonymous as



‘the interesting group of people who express their principles in an activist way’). Applying this heuristic, one author extracted identity claims that were voiced in specific speech acts within each communication event. Subsequently, the other author reviewed this preliminary list of identity claims and marked any claims that were ambiguous or dubious. After discussing and eliminating claims on which no agreement was reached, we compiled two chronologically ordered lists with 68 identity claims for Operation Westboro and 59 for Operation Facebook, respectively.

The next step of our analysis involved assessing the performativity of each identity claim. In line with speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), we acknowledge the performative character of all kinds of utterances (see also Butler, 1990); however, we do not perceive all identity claims to be equally consequential. While various speech acts can performatively contribute to the construction and reproduction of identity, we distinguish between two basic types of speech acts: those that are implicitly performative, or as Searle (1975) termed them, ‘assertives’, and those that are more explicitly performative or ‘declaratives’. Implicitly performative speech acts state the truth of a claim or a proposition – for example, a statement like ‘Anonymous is legion’ is such an act. Explicitly performative speech acts change reality or create a new instance of reality through a certain utterance: the revelation of a hacker’s identity, for example, is an explicitly performative act. Communication scholars distinguish between various further types of speech acts (such as ‘commissives’ or ‘directives’; see Cooren, 2004). However, we chose to concentrate our analysis on assertives and declaratives, which represent clearly distinguishable and opposed poles in a continuum of performativity. To account for the different degrees of performativity, which we consider particularly relevant to establishing and maintaining organizationality, we coded the identity claims that we identified, using a two-dimensional matrix (see Table II).

One dimension of the matrix concerned whether each identity claim was either primarily assertive, claiming the truth of a statement, or primarily declarative, changing reality by performing the statement. This distinction allowed us to assess the preconditions for different degrees of performativity during an episode as well as how identity claims helped, at least temporarily, resolve a struggle over identity. The second dimension entailed coding whether each identity claim represented either a positive (‘who we are’) or a negative (‘who are we not’) positioning (Ran and Duimering, 2007; see also the notion of ‘positive distinctiveness’ in Cooren et al., 2011). This dimension allowed us to capture how an identity claim helped demarcate organizational boundaries. In line with Luhmann (1999), we assume that positive and negative forms of positioning differ significantly in one respect:

Distinctions [of this kind] are built asymmetrically. [...] [I]n the very moment of their use [...], one side of the distinction and, consequently, not the other is designated. In linguistics, the term ‘marking’ indicates that one (and not the other) side of a distinction should be dealt with as a problem. (Luhmann, 1999, p. 27)

On that basis, we assume that negatively positioned identity claims, which mark the ‘outside’ of a social phenomenon, emphasize the existence of a boundary more strongly.

Table II. Identity-claim analysis matrix

	<b>Assertive speech act:</b> Aspects of a statement claiming the truth of a proposition (implicitly performative speech acts)	<b>Declarative speech act:</b> Aspects of a statement that change the reality in accordance with a declaration (explicitly performative speech acts)
<b>Positive positioning:</b> Aspects of statements addressing questions such as ‘who are we?’ and ‘what do we do?’	Identity claims asserting that Anonymous is or does something in a certain way <i>Example: ‘When Anonymous says we support free speech, we mean it’. (Press release on AnonNews.org)</i>	Identity claims that change or reinforce what Anonymous is or does by declaration <i>Example: ‘Take this defacement as a simple warning: go away’. (Message placed on WBC website during radio interview)</i>
<b>Negative positioning:</b> Aspects of statements addressing questions such as “who are we not?” and “what do we not do?”	Identity claims asserting that Anonymous is not or does not do something in a certain way <i>Example ‘We don’t kill the messenger. That’s not our style’ (Tweet on AnonOps)</i>	Identity claims that change or reinforce what Anonymous is not or does not do by declaration <i>Example ‘One skiddy queer chap named Anthony [...] from the US in Ohio decided to take it upon himself to have some lulz with creating an imaginary opfacebook (Press coverage by Cnet.com)</i>

To categorize identity claims according to the matrix depicted in Table II, each author coded independently of the other as either positive or negative each of the total of 127 identity claims that had been identified in both episodes. Furthermore, each identity claim was ranked on the basis of a four-point scale as (1) ‘assertive’, (2) ‘rather assertive’, (3) ‘rather declarative’, or (4) ‘declarative’. When we merged our coding results, we revisited and discussed cases where our coding differed in terms of orientation (i.e., positive/negative and assertive/declarative; see Table II for examples). In the course of these discussions, we reached an agreement for the coding of each of these contested claims taking into account the overall context of each episode. In the final step of our data analysis, we produced descriptive statistics for each of the two episodes (i.e., operations), to depict the point in time at which different types of identity claims emerged and the frequency with which they emerged.

## FINDINGS OF THE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY CLAIMS

### Critical Episode I: Operation Westboro

The Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), an unaffiliated American church headquartered in Topeka, Kansas, is known for its extreme ideological positions – especially on homosexuality – and for engaging in activities such as running the homophobic website godhatesfags.com.

On February 19, 2011, a WBC spokeswoman was made aware via Twitter of a letter supposedly authored by Anonymous that threatened to ‘eradicate’ WBC websites and she published a response entitled ‘Bring it!’ on a WBC website. The open letter addressed to WBC had been published on AnonNews.org, which allows anyone to post statements without being registered or required to provide any other form of authentication. This website is regularly used for publishing information about Anonymous, such as press releases.

The story was picked up swiftly by several news media outlets, such as CBS News and Salon.com, which attributed the threat letter to Anonymous without questioning any of the identity claims that either the threat letter or the WBC response letter made. The identity claims in the threat letter consisted in assertive self-descriptions such as ‘We, the collective super-consciousness known as Anonymous’ or pronouncements like ‘you will meet with the vicious retaliatory arm of Anonymous’. In addition to quoting from the threat letter, third parties such as the WBC made statements like ‘coward crybaby “hackers”’ and media outlets made claims such as ‘Anonymous is at it again’, thus adding further identity claims to the debate by attributing the operation to Anonymous.

On the following day, however, a press release on AnonNews.org accused the WBC of having faked the open letter, while also warning fellow Anons that the WBC might have set a trap to make money by suing anyone who was involved in distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. A DDoS attack occurs when hackers force a large number of coordinated computers to try to connect to a specific web server until it becomes overloaded and is rendered temporarily inaccessible to other users.

When reporting on the issue, media outlets had to deal with conflicting identity claims. The second press release differed from the first in that it complemented positive assertions regarding the nature of Anonymous (‘When Anonymous says we support free speech, we mean it’) with negative assertions regarding the initial threat letter (‘We’re a bit groggy and don’t remember sending it’). Questioning who was actually authorized to speak on behalf of Anonymous, the online magazine Salon.com explicitly asked, ‘Why should the second open letter be given any more credence than the first?’ This question proved salient, because WBC websites were indeed attacked in the days afterwards.

Three days after the second press release and subsequent reports, the negotiations on whether or not the first threat letter could be attributed to Anonymous reached at least a provisional closure through a staged performance, when a self-declared member of Anonymous gave a live interview to David Pakman, the host of a popular radio talk show (full video available here: <http://youtu.be/OZJwSjor4hM>). During this interview, the hacker attributed the attacks to another hacker known as ‘The Jester’ and again denied that Anonymous had been involved, emphasizing that the initial open letter had come out of nowhere and that it did not ‘seem like the writing style we would make’. In order to bolster the validity of his claims, he complemented and authenticated them by publicly performing a defacement of the WBC website during the live interview, placing the following message from Anonymous on the website: ‘Take this defacement as a simple warning: go away’. In turn, the radio host confirmed his actions, stating ‘I’m getting a thumbs up from my producer that there has been a message posted that appears to be from Anonymous’, which was followed by media reports subscribing to the declarative nature of this identity claim (e.g., ‘Anonymous apparently did “bring it” after all’). Figure 1 presents a chronology of the key communicative events of Operation Westboro.



Figure 1. Chronology of communicative events in Operation Westboro

Figure 2 tracks the types of identity claims that were made in these key communication events of the Operation Westboro episode. What we can see is that the initially positive assertions defining what Anonymous is were countered by a combination of both positive (what it is) and negative assertions (what it is not), before the actual live website hack was performed. In turn, the performance of the website hack—a positive declaration of identity—effectively brought the episode to a close.

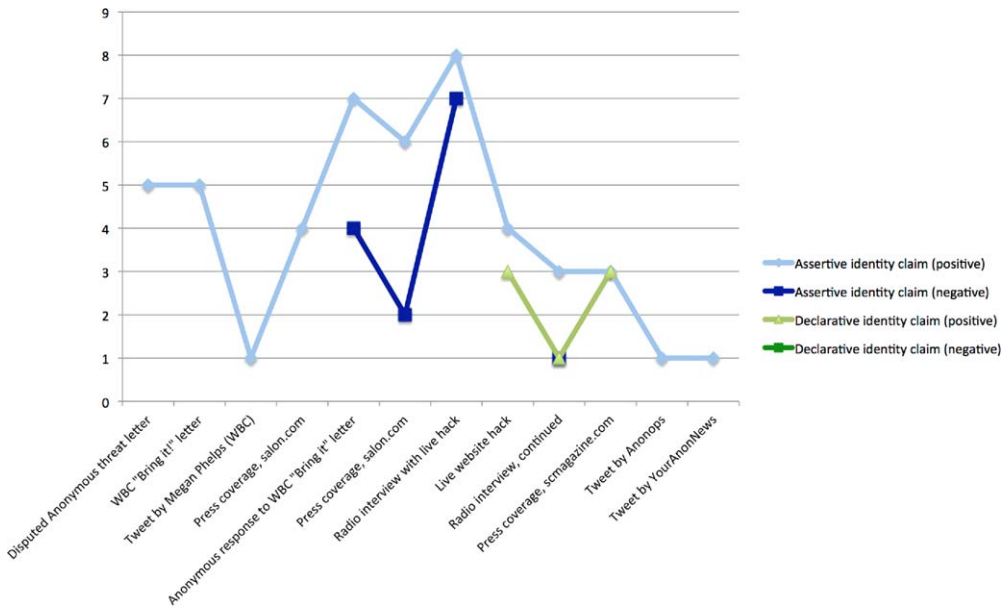


Figure 2. Identity claims made in communicative events of Operation Westboro

### Critical Episode II: Operation Facebook

In the second critical episode, Operation Facebook, the number of communicative events peaked in August and in November 2011. In August 2011, a group claiming to be part of Anonymous declared 'War on Facebook' and announced an upcoming take-down of the social networking site that would take place on 5 November<sup>4</sup> 2011 via a newly set up Twitter account called OpFacebook. The announcement had been prepared collaboratively via PiratePad, a public online tool for anonymous collaborative writing. Calling for 'willing hacktivists' to 'join the cause', the announcement proclaimed 'the right to not be surveilled, not be stalked, and not be used for profit'. Again, some media outlets such as Cnet.com simply reported the announcement unquestioningly, thus confirming and reinforcing certain identity claims: 'It comes from Anonymous, the interesting group of people who express their principles in an activist way by infiltrating the systems of the unsuspecting or the merely complacent'.

In an initial response to these press reports, the authenticity of Operation Facebook was renounced via a post on the Twitter account AnonOps: 'TO PRESS: [...] #OpFacebook is just ANOTHER FAKE!' However, a few hours later, another tweet from AnonOps declared that '#OpFacebook is being organised by some Anons. This does not necessarily mean that all of #Anonymous agrees with it'.

The fact that OpFacebook had been announced on a separate Twitter account had initially raised some suspicion and doubts among journalists about whether or not the attack would actually take place on behalf of Anonymous – for instance, a newscast on Cnet.com asked: 'Is Anonymous unanimous on Facebook plot?' The AnonOps' statement that '#OpFacebook is being organised by some Anons' mentioned previously, however, seemed to effectively settle the matter. The Washington Post, for instance,

considered the account AnonOps to be a credible communication channel, calling it a more mainstream Anonymous Twitter account. Another outlet, PCMag.com, also cited the statement published on AnonOps and declared facetiously that ‘if a few people get together in the name of Anonymous and decide to hack Facebook on November 5, Anonymous is behind the planned Facebook hack’.

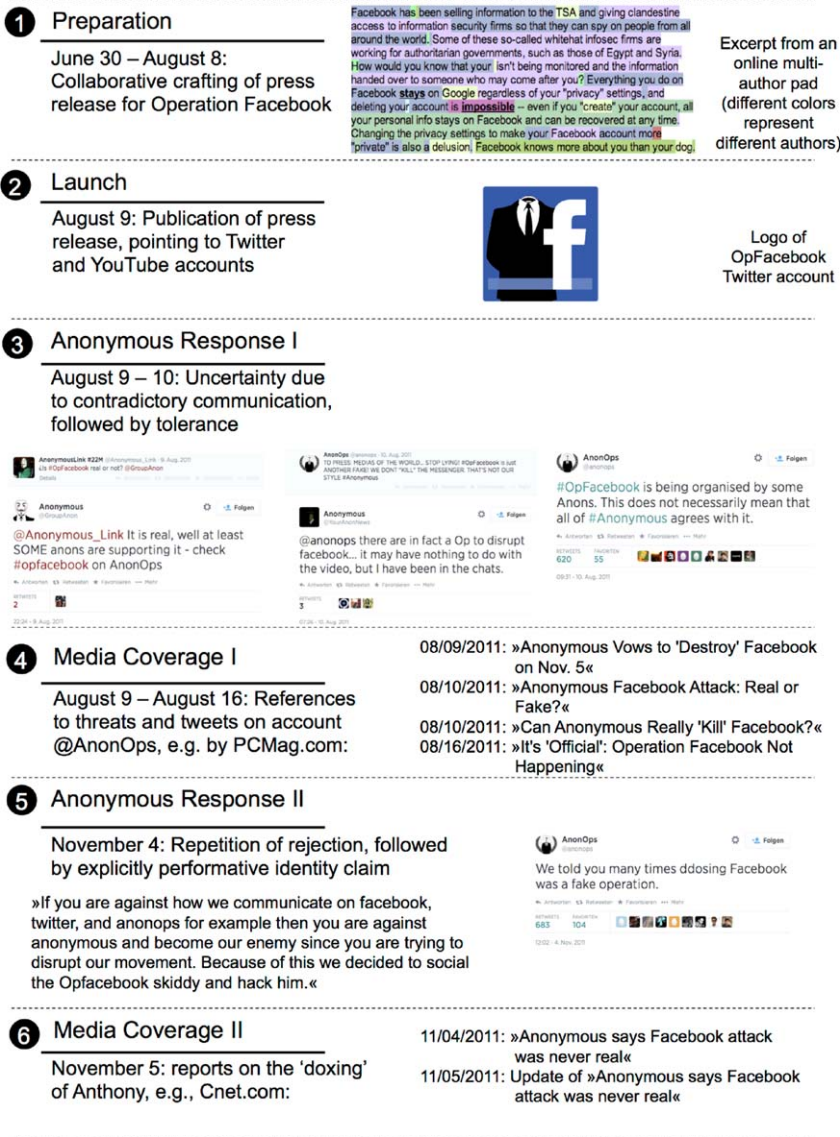
Following the initial publication of the threat letter, the OpFacebook Twitter account regularly featured tweets emphasizing that Operation Facebook was not a fake: ‘Are we fake?: No, our group of anons have been loyal for 4-5+ years’. Also, some media outlets such as PCmag.com continued their coverage of Operation Facebook and questioned ‘Anonymous’ ability to pull off such a major operation’.

However, on 4 November 4 2011, one day before the supposedly planned attack on Facebook, another open letter to the public exposed the alleged originator of the threat to demonstrate that Operation Facebook was *not* supported by Anonymous. The key passage, which was also quoted at length in various press reports, states:

One skiddy queer chap named Anthony [last name redacted] from the US in Ohio decided to take it upon himself to have some lulz with creating an imaginary opfacebook and pawning it off as a legit anon op. Despite us telling this mate several times we did not support his op, he continued to push his agenda for lulz. This op is phony but he continues to say it’s an anon op.

‘Doxing’ the hacker named Anthony – that is, revealing personal information about this hacker’s identity (including his real name, postal address, and telephone number) – effectively overturned the initially positive declaration that the organizers of Operation Facebook could be considered part of Anonymous. In addition to several assertive, both positive (‘Anonymous is a movement we don’t take kindly to when people try to fuck it up’) and negative (‘No one member is bigger than Anonymous. This shall teach you a lesson Anthony’) identity claims, Anonymous hackers declared the end of Operation Facebook as an Anonymous operation by publishing Anthony’s full name and personal contact information. As in the case of Operation Westboro, various media reports supported and reinforced the declarative speech act by confirming its accuracy: ‘[Anthony] also confirmed that he is the man named by the statement, but said he no longer lives at the address that was disclosed’.

Figures 3 and 4 present a chronology of the key communicative events that comprise the Operation Facebook episode and track the types of identity claims that were made in the course of the events that took place. As in the case of Operation Westboro, in Operation Facebook the first escalation of conflicting identity claims was preliminarily concluded by means of positive identity declarations, such as tweets in which AnonOps explicitly acknowledged that OpFacebook was pursued by ‘some Anons’. However, the Operation Facebook episode as a whole was finally brought to a close a couple of months later when Anthony was ‘doxed’. This decisive move represents a strongly negative declarative speech act and led to a series of negative assertions in the press with regard to what Anonymous is *not* and does *not* do. For example, CNet.com reported that ‘Anonymous says Facebook attack was never real’ and that ‘it doesn’t make sense to shut down a site they use to get their message out’.



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Figure 3. Chronology of communicative events in Operation Facebook

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The central question that guided our paper was how fluid social collectives achieve organizationality. Our empirical investigation of the hacker collective Anonymous allowed us to validate our theoretical assumptions about the crucial role of identity claims (Bartel and Dutton, 2001) in accomplishing organizationality in fluidity. Specifically, in the Anonymous case, organizationality was accomplished through carefully crafted and staged speech acts that were claimed to have taken place on behalf of Anonymous as an organizational endeavour. In both episodes, the initial phase was characterized by

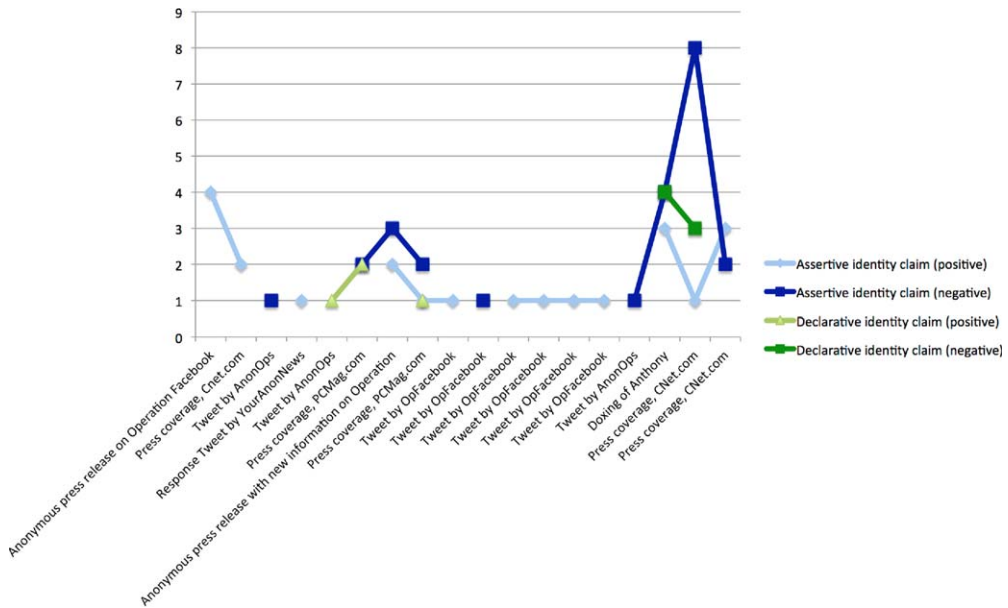


Figure 4. Identity claims made in communicative events of Operation Facebook

assertive speech acts that served to delineate a boundary around Anonymous and its identity and to describe what Anonymous is and what it is not. These identity claims were performed by different social actors who partly contradicted each other. However, such assertive identity claims did not succeed in settling the debate and the puzzle of whether a specific hacker operation had been authorized to take place on behalf of Anonymous or not remained unresolved. In both episodes, the debate escalated until a well-prepared and staged declarative speech act (e.g., the revelation of a particular hacker's identity) resolved the identity contestation and, at least temporarily, reinstated organizational actorhood.

There is, however, an important difference between the two episodes we analyzed. In the Operation Westboro episode, the declarative performance of the live hack during the radio interview represented what we describe as 'positive positioning' (see also Ran and Duimering, 2007); in other words, by successfully performing a live hack on the Westboro website during the radio interview, the hacker substantiated the denial of the allegation that the threat letter had been authored by Anonymous. Accordingly, through this performance, the hacker authenticated his credibility and defined positively what Anonymous is (a practice of 'equipping' in the terminology of Bartel and Dutton, 2001). In contrast, in the Operation Facebook episode the initial positive positioning, which effectively acknowledged that the people behind Operation Facebook were indeed members of Anonymous, was later 'corrected' through a (rather harsh) negative declarative speech act; namely, the disclosure of the 'disowned' hacker's identity. The performance of this corrective communicative act, which aimed at demarcating afresh the identity of Anonymous, shows that declarative speech acts can effectively settle debates on organizational identity. This effect may be temporary though, because such acts



can be overruled at a later point in time. Nevertheless, in this case, by ‘doxing’ the identity of the initiator of Operation Facebook – that is, by revealing his real name, postal address, and telephone number – other hackers defined negatively what Anonymous is not and thus demarcated the boundary of the social collective. At the same time, the practice of ‘doxing’ can be seen as an effort to demonstrate that the hackers behind it can hack other hackers and in that way struggle for recognition as the ‘real’ spokespersons of Anonymous. In sum, the cross-comparison of the two episodes indicates that negative-declarative claims may be able to demarcate the communicative boundary of a social collective most clearly. This is because they tend to emphasize the boundary more strongly, that is, by specifying what lies outside or is excluded from the organizational endeavour (see also Luhmann, 1999).

Furthermore, in line with the terminology of McPhee and Zaug (2009), we can interpret the practice of ‘doxing’ as an instance of *asymmetric* membership negotiation, where the weight lies on exclusion rather than on inclusion. Although in fluid social collectives membership may never be explicitly granted, it can be revoked nevertheless. Fluid social collectives like Anonymous seem to be configured such that the communicative constitution of organization does not require inclusive forms of membership negotiation (such as recruiting practices or negotiations on work contracts) like those that are applied in more conventional organizational settings. In this respect, Anonymous, as a fluid social collective that is open to contributions from ‘outsiders’, seems to resemble a social movement, network, or community (see Sillince, 2010). However, precisely because of this fluidity, for organizationality to be communicatively constituted it appears to be necessary that the social collective can employ, at least situationally, practices of *exclusive* membership negotiations that affirm collective decisionmaking, actorhood, and identity, as the practice of ‘doxing’ in the Operation Facebook episode demonstrated. In the terminology of Ahrne and Brunsson (2011; see also Rasche et al., 2013), the ‘doxing’ practice can be seen as performing a provisional ‘completion’ of the organization. However, in contrast to Schreyögg and Sydow (2010), our study implies that fluid social collectives can perpetuate their organizationality despite lacking a ‘permanent’ boundary, as long as they can mobilize boundary-drawing practices (such as identity claims) at least situationally.

In turn, the actual accomplishment of demarcating organizational boundaries via identity claims, of course, depends on whether or not these claims are accepted as having validly taken place on behalf of the collective; otherwise, they may become the subject of negotiation and contestation, thus effectively fueling further escalations. These considerations bring us back to Austin’s (1962) notion of the ‘felicity conditions’ that need to be fulfilled for a speech act to unleash its performative effects. Our empirical investigation of the Anonymous case indicates that, in fluid settings that are characterized by a low degree of institutionalization and largely undefined felicity conditions, the preparation and performance of the identity claim itself carry greater weight than in less fluid settings. In both episodes, a preliminary settlement of contestations to organizational actorhood was accomplished through speech acts that either depended on a credible communicative history (such as in the first part of Operation Facebook, where the AnonOps Twitter account was considered to be an authoritative communication channel) or required a thorough preparation and staging that led to tangible material

outcomes (such as in the live hack in Operation Westboro and in the ‘doxing’ of the hacker named Anthony in Operation Facebook). In the latter case, in order to stage the act of ‘doxing’ and successfully expose the identity of the hacker named Anthony, other hackers had to investigate and cross-validate the true identity of the person behind the pseudonym that was used to announce the operation. Similarly, the live hack of the Westboro website in the radio interview had to be carefully prepared in order to validate the hacker’s credibility even in an ambiguous social setting. This finding also confirms O’Mahony and Ferraro’s (2007) assessment that even the most fluid social collectives such as online communities ‘are not immune to well-known general principles of organizing’ (p. 1100).

To conclude, our conceptual and empirical inquiry makes a twofold contribution to the literature in management and organization studies: first, our work adds to research on organizational identity more generally (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) and, within this literature, to language-centred perspectives in particular (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2005; Hardy et al., 2005). Specifically, by drawing on the emerging CCO perspective in organization studies (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011), we have further advanced language-centred perspectives on identity formation by embedding this line of thinking into a larger ‘communicational ontology’ of organization (Cooren, 2012). While our perspective is largely aligned with the baseline assumptions of processual views on identity formation (e.g., Coupland and Brown, 2004; Hardy et al., 2005; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), we took these works one step further by showing how loose social collectives can achieve organizational actorhood and an entity-like character despite their fluidity (e.g., in terms of contested or unclear memberships). As we have demonstrated with the case of Anonymous, organizationality is a precarious accomplishment (see Cooren et al., 2011) that needs to be repeatedly reinstated through the performance of certain speech acts (e.g., identity claims) and their attribution to an overarching organizational address (see also Drepper, 2005). Importantly, these theoretical considerations place the performance of identity claims at the heart of constituting organizational phenomena in the first place (see also Koschmann, 2013).

Second, we have developed an answer to the research question of how fluid social collectives accomplish organizationality. On the basis of our study of the hacker collective Anonymous, we have empirically shown how the organizationality of a fluid social collective was successfully accomplished through the careful preparation and ‘staging’ of performative identity claims that resolved disputes over contested identities. As we have demonstrated, even if a social collective like Anonymous is fluid (or ‘partial’ in the terminology of Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011) in the sense of having unclear membership, its organizationality can be at least temporarily achieved through various types of identity claims and thus ensure its status as an organizational actor. In that respect, our paper develops a novel and communication-centred notion of organizationality, thus adding a processual view to recent debates on the minimum conditions that must be satisfied for organizational phenomena to arise (e.g., King et al., 2010; Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011).

Vice-versa, the notion of organizationality also enables us to add to the existing literature on identity claims (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Vaast et al., 2013). Specifically, the notion of organizationality can help explain why social actors

in fluid settings seem to invest enormous effort in crafting and staging identity claims (see also the identity claim typology as developed by Bartel and Dutton, 2001). In our view, this is because when the identity and boundaries of an organizational phenomenon are contested, organizational actorhood is ultimately endangered, as well (King et al., 2010; Bencherki and Cooren, 2011). While organizational actorhood allows individual actors to extend their individual agency (Nicotera, 2013, p. 71), it raises the necessity to continuously maintain and 'feed' the organizational 'monster' (Cooren, 2006) with the performance of recurrent communicative practices, at the same time.

As a wider implication of our study, we believe that our theoretical considerations are not confined to a specific form of organizational fluidity (e.g., characterized by unclear or contested membership), but can also be extended to settings characterized by other forms of fluidity. Examples of other forms of fluidity include firms that strongly rely on outsourcing and sub-contracting (Walsh and Deery, 2006) and organizations that are temporary in nature (Bakker, 2010) or undergoing radical organizational change (Dawson, 2012). Thus, our proposed framework also allows for understanding phenomena of fluidity in more conventional organizational settings. For instance, our conceptualization can help explain how organizationality is reinstated in what traditional theories of radical organizational change describe as 'punctuations'; that is, periods characterized by high fluidity and radical change or restructuring (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli and Tushman, 1994; Gioia et al., 2013). In that respect, we presume that organizational phenomena that go through temporary periods of fluidity tend to require 'conversations for closure' (Ford and Ford, 1995) in order to retain or re-establish their organizationality. Such closure can be accomplished through explicitly performative speech acts, such as the carefully prepared and staged identity claims that were made in the case of Anonymous. Future research will benefit from comparing different empirical cases in a range of fluid settings where organizationality is at stake and either maintained or lost, in order to explore in depth the boundary conditions of accomplishing organizationality. Hence, we believe that our notion of organizationality can prove generative for illuminating a larger horizon of social collectives regarding the question of to what extent they do (or do not) constitute organizational forms (in a similar line of thinking, see, for instance, the recent study by Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2015) on bike commuters as a social collective).

On a final note, we believe that some important practical implications can be derived from our study, as well. For organizers and managers confronted with situations of fluidity (e.g., organizational transformation processes such as downsizing and restructuring or mergers and acquisitions), our study implies that performing identity claims is key for accomplishing organizational actorhood. In this context, managers need to remain sensitive to the importance of reaching (at least provisional) communicative closure (see also Ford and Ford, 1995) by means of staged identity claims, while taking into account the situational 'felicity conditions' of such speech acts, at the same time (Austin, 1962). However, as we have seen in the Anonymous case, identity claims can always become subject to further contestations. Thus, the credibility of identity claims depends on the degree to which they can be backed up by such carefully prepared and staged performances as well as by concrete material anchors (such as established communication channels). In

the light of these considerations, we hope that our proposed conceptualization of organizational identity can pave the way towards further elaborations on the idea of ‘management by performing identity’ rather than management by decree.

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