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# A Case Study Analysis of KnightSec and the Steubenville Rape Case

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## Abstract

The Anonymous hacktivist movement began in earnest in 2008 with Operation Chanology. Over the years and through various operations and through various factions, Anonymous has espoused freedom of information and become an advocate for individuals' rights and protections. In late 2012, an Anonymous member KY Anonymous began a series of operations under the banner of KnightSec. These Justice Operations went after many individuals and groups but culminated with operations in support of a victim of a rape and against the rapists from Steubenville, Ohio. Using Case Study analysis of collected news articles, blogs, social media accounts and such, an analysis of the KnightSec movement was conducted. Though the movement eventually collapsed, valuable lessons of social media use by many participatory parties were concluded. Social media, an integral part of all actors in the events, was the facilitator for nearly all communications as well as archivist for all actions, legal, illegal and those in between.

**Keywords:** KnightSec, Steubenville Rape Case, Anonymous, Operation RollRedRoll, Occupy Steubenville, Westboro Baptist Church, Trent Mays, Ma'lik Richmond

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Just as the Internet has transformed the way we communicate with others and find information, it has also had a profound effect on the ways we behave online. While online, some people behave in ways that appear to be uninhibited when compared to their usual offline behavior (Suler, 2004). This is known as "the online disinhibition effect." The online environment allows people to reveal emotions, fears, and wishes that they might not otherwise express

offline. They might even show acts of kindness and generosity (Wright & Li, 2011). A darker side to the disinhibition effect online is that some people can be rude, critical, angry, hateful, or threatening. This is known as toxic disinhibition (Suler, 2005). Suler argues that what determine "whether online disinhibition is benign, toxic, or a compromise formation of the two" (p. 184) are multiple factors (i.e., dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjections, dissociative imagination, attenuated status and

authority, individual differences) which loosen repressive barriers. He explains that sometimes one, two, or more of these factors produce the online disinhibition effect. This paper will specifically focus on one factor described by Suler: Dissociative Anonymity, because this factor might help to explain the formation of hacktivist groups.

When someone is online, they can choose to have their identity partially or completely hidden. Other identifiers, like usernames and e-mail addresses, might be visible but they don't reveal much about users' identity. Suler (2005) proposes that this factor is one of the primary culprits of the online disinhibition effect. He argues that "when people have the opportunity to detach their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing or acting out" (p. 185). As a result, online behavior is not fully acknowledged and integrated into users' online or offline identity. Thus, when users engage in hostile or deviant acts online, the person is able to evade responsibility for their actions. A few studies have specifically examined anonymous aggressive behaviors in the cyber context. In particular, Bartlett and Gentile (2012) found that young people who held positive attitudes about anonymous cyberbullying engaged in more of this behavior. Later research by Wright (2013) revealed that young people's confidence with not getting caught for acting aggressively online related to their positive beliefs about remaining anonymous in the cyber context. To improve upon the design in her previous study, Wright (2014) focused on the perpetration of anonymous cyber aggression, a type of online aggressive behavior carried out anonymously. Her findings suggested that increases in anonymous cyber aggression were more related to stronger beliefs about anonymity among young people. Dissociative anonymity might account for the anonymous actions of hacktivist groups.

## 2. ANONYMOUS

In October of 2003, a new website named 4chan began. It was modeled after a similar Japanese Anime-sharing website known as 2chan which originally stood for "two channels," or two designated boards for posting material: 2chan/a for Anime pictures and stories and 2chan/b for everything else. That same designation held for 4chan/b. It was a non-specific posting board where nearly anything could be posted and

shared by anyone anonymously. Over the years, 4chan/b became one of the most prolific generators of Internet memes. Memes are shared cultural references, similar to inside jokes. 4chan/b remained an informal website where individuals traded jokes, insults, pornography, gross humor and pictures and anything else they chose. However, in January of 2008, an outlandish video clip of practicing Scientologist Tom Cruise fervently espousing the beliefs of the church was leaked to the Internet and went viral. The church tried to remove the video from the Internet and in doing so, met with outrage by members of 4chan/b who began to organize themselves into a shared-belief collective which they called Anonymous. Anonymous members began physical protests at the Church of Scientology facilities around the world, promoting a belief that information should be free and entities such as the Church should not be allowed to censor materials on the Internet. This was the start of Operation Chanology; the Anonymous movement had begun.

Anonymous would organize and participate in many protests and operations through the years: Operation Payback in 2010 (against censorship of WikiLeaks), the Freedom Operations in 2011 (supporting protests in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt), and support of the Occupy Movements in 2011. Anonymous always maintained that no single individual should take credit for the collective's actions; in other words, no "Glory Fagging." Several other offshoot hacker groups would conduct parallel operations during this time, both in support of Anonymous' goals and against them. Hacking groups such as LulzSec, CabinCr3w, TeaMp0isoN, Underground Nazi, and Team GhostShell began to rise and fall in rapid succession. But in late 2012, a new hacker group captured the collective imagination like none other had in a long time. Their name was KnightSec and their aim was to conduct what they called, "Justice Operations."

## 3. LITERATURE SEARCH

Knuttila (2011) commented on the Internet website 4chan's use of anonymity to protect users' identity which helped foster a sense of invulnerability. Leung (2013) also examined the use of anonymity as a cultural identity and found it is ever shifting due to several factors to include society's view of the cultural stereotypes. Soncul (2014) investigated the use of the Guy Fawkes mask through the ages all

the way to its present day association with the Anonymous hacktivist group.

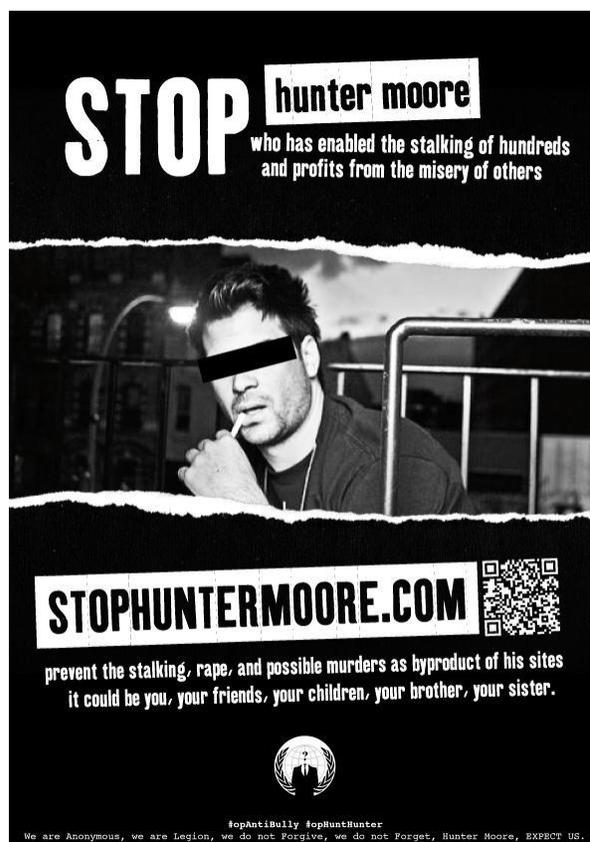
Chui (2014) argued that anonymity alone could not explain Anonymous' anti-social behavior, but in fact it was a mix of a number of factors, to include the medium used, political and social norms of the group and the degree of anonymity perceived. Bennett, Segerberg and Walker (2014) analyzed how the Occupy Wall Street crowd used social media in the form of Twitter to produce relatively complex organizational routines. Fuchs (2013) showed that both liberalism and socialism are espoused within Anonymous so that these two worldviews co-exist, complement, and also conflict one another.

#### 4. KNIGHTSEC

Observations recorded on the topic of KnightSec and its operations and actions was part of a Case Study analysis of the hacktivist group Anonymous. Yin (2009) described what he considered to be the criteria for using this method of analysis. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

Case Study analysis pulls together as much information on the topic as possible so that trends and actions can be identified and analyzed to determine conclusion and future possible activities. In this study, material in the form of news articles, PasteBin posts, Twitter feeds, Facebook posts and scholarly articles and books were cataloged and utilized.

In September of 2012, a Facebook page for Anonymous of Kentucky and a Twitter account for @KYAnonymous were created. The Facebook page called for immediate protest action against a Clark County Kentucky (KY) School Board member. Almost from its inception, the Facebook page hit local issues hard and fast, calling for protests, and marches on the Winchester, KY City Hall. Anonymous of Kentucky announced that their Twitter account had been suspended and then reactivated, an electronic form of "time out." But by late October, the Facebook page was abandoned in favor of the Twitter account.



Operation Hunt Hunter Recruitment Poster

On December 1, 2012, @KYAnonymous announces the beginning of Operation Hunt Hunter. Hunter Moore ran a revenge porn website, isanyoneup.com. Ex-boyfriends and others, who were able to obtain nude shots of women, would post the pictures on the website and identify the individuals. The website would eventually be shut down, but then Moore announced that another website, huntermoore.tv, would be starting up and not only would the nude photos be linked to an identity, they would also include location data of where the person lived. Five days later, Anonymous shut down Moore's new website with a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack and later posted personal information of Moore in a PasteBin post. The next day, @KYAnonymous coined the phrase KnightSec to advertise the operations; Knight as in a Knight in shining armor coming to the rescue of the sexploitation victims and Sec, which was short for Security, an homage to other hacker groups who modeled their names after the notorious LulzSec group.

On December 14, 2012, a lone gunman in Newtown, CT went on a shooting spree and took the lives of his mother, 6 adults and 20 children at Sandy Hook Elementary School before taking his own life. The next day, the Spokesperson for the Westboro Baptist Church, Shirley Phelps-Roper, announced that members of the church would be traveling to Newtown, CT to picket in celebration "to sing praise to God for the glory of his work in executing his judgment."

The Westboro Baptist Church and Anonymous had battled one another many times over the past decade. Immediately, Anonymous posted doxes of church members' personal information online. Other hacking groups began to join in on the attacks. UGNazi hijacked the Twitter account of Ms. Phelps-Roper, @DearShirley.



#### @DearShirley Twitter Account Hacked

Anonymous also DDoS'd the church's website, godhatesfags.com, and shut it down. They also created PasteBin posts detailing church members' personal information, including names, telephone numbers, and social security numbers as well as names of members' children and in some cases grandchildren. Anonymous claimed to have changed Ms. Phelps-Roper's PC desktop wallpaper to gay porn and filed a death certificate for her. When church members actually showed up in Newtown, Anonymous tweeted real-time updates of the movements of church members such as where in town they were eating and what their hotel room numbers

were. On the 20th of December, vigilante hacker, Th3J3st3r, joined in on the Operation Westboro, taking down 10 of the 19 websites operated by the church. When it later became known that the church had used Black Lotus Communications to help mitigate DDoS attacks, Black Lotus announced that it would donate all the revenue they had received from the church to charity (Schwartz, 2012; Stone, 2012).

## 5. STEUBENVILLE

### Operation RollRedRoll and Occupy Steubenville

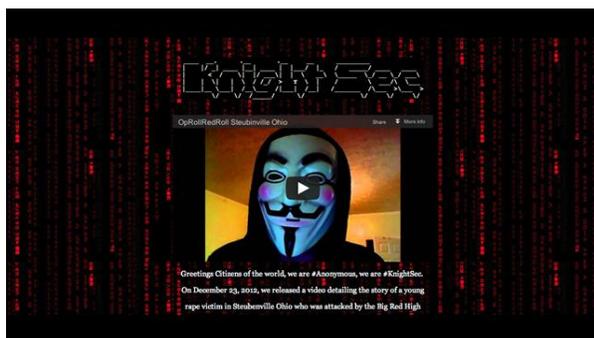
While KnightSec was focused on Operation Westboro, on December 16, the New York Times published an article on a rape case against two juveniles in Steubenville, OH. The article detailed the events of the rape which occurred back in August as well as what was perceived by many as a cover-up. Because the two juveniles were members of the town's iconic high school football team, many felt they received preferential treatment and assistance in their case by school officials (Macur & Schweber, 2012). Two local bloggers had been working on attracting media attention since the beginning of the case.

Michelle McKee and her friend, Alexandra Goddard, a crime blogger who blogged under the pen name, Prinnie, were relentless in exposing the tweets they obtained which detailed many of the events of the night as well as the aftermath. McKee passed some of the incriminating tweets and photos they had obtained to @KYAnonymous (Kushner, 2013).

@KYAnonymous allegedly approached another hacker, @JusBatCat, to see if he could break into the website of Steubenville High School's sports teams' website, rollredroll.com, for any information which might be used. Apparently @JustBatCat simply guessed what the Administrator's password was and got in after only a few minutes of work. Files containing personal information of the football team were obtained from the hacked website (McElwain, 2013). On December 24, @KYAnonymous released a video announcing the beginning of what he called Operation RollRedRoll. The video stated that unless the victim received a full apology from everyone connected with the case, all the personal information of the football team would be doxed to the public (Macur, 2012).



Recovered photo from the night of the events



Operation RollRedRoll Website Defacement

"This is a warning shot to the school faculty, the parents of those involved and those involved especially. A preliminary 'dox' is being released on some of those involved, while a full size dox of everyone involved including names, social security numbers, addresses, relatives and phone numbers is being compiled as you watch this video, of every single member of the football team, those involved, the coaches, the principal and more. These docs will be released Media attention escalates as the story takes on a life of its own. @KYAnonymous is seen more

and more as the sole face of KnightSec and as a quasi-spokesman for the collective. @KYAnonymous is interviewed on numerous news programs and by celebrities such as Rosanne Barr and Anderson Cooper (Kim, 2013; WTRF, 2012).

unless all accused parties come forward by New Year's Day and issue a public apology to the girl and her family" (First Coast News, 2012, p. 1).

Two peaceful demonstrations were organized to support the victim, known in the press as "Jane Doe." The demonstrations were to be held in front of the Jefferson County Courthouse on December 29, 2012 and January 5, 2013, and would be called Occupy Steubenville (WTRF, 2012). In an interview with radio station Q92 on December 28, @KYAnonymous indicated that the amount of attention the Operation RollRedRoll was receiving nationally and internationally was sufficient so the Social Security numbers of the football team members would not be released. The decision was also in support of the wishes of Jane Doe and her family, who did not want social security numbers of innocent members of the football team released (Revmantis, 2012). The first demonstration brought in approximately 300 to 400 individuals while the second protest was covered by all major news organizations and attracted a thousand protestors (Eifling, 2012; Miller, 2012; Singer, 2012).



Rosanne Barr's Twitter profile picture after Occupy Steubenville protest

On January 2, 2013, after quietly reaching out to witnesses who were involved in the case looking for more evidence, @KYAnonymous received a video file which was taken shortly after the August rape events. The video was of

Steubenville High School graduate, Michael Nodianos, laughing hysterically as he joked repeatedly about the victim appearing "dead" and being raped. National news media instantly picked up the story and the clip aired repeatedly on national news sites over the next few days (Craft, 2013; Harkinson, 2013).

After Twitter user @ihazcandy complains that he felt threatened by Twitter Direct Messages from @KYAnonymous, Twitter suspends @KYAnonymous' account forcing him to relocate to mirror account @KYAnonymous1. @KYAnonymous denied the accusations and claimed that he was being set up (Twitchy Staff, 2013). Later in January, @KYAnonymous received a tip that the FBI was watching him. After posting on Twitter that he was going dark for a while, he got a tweet from an unknown account asking, "Why would you do that, Derek Lostutter of Winchester, Kentucky?" (Kushner, 2013, p. 1). While the first name had been misspelled, the last name and location were correct; @KYAnonymous' identity was now known by someone. Lostutter distanced himself from the group and the activities in Steubenville in an attempt to protect himself.

Rumors arose on Twitter that Operation RollRedRoll hacker @JustBatCat was arrested. On February 3rd, @ChannelZeroYT tweets that during a Skype chat with @JustBatCat, he heard sounds which led him to believe that law enforcement agents had broken into @JustBatCat's residence to arrest him. However, in a response from individuals to dox him, @JustBatCat revealed on Twitter that his real name is Noah McHugh and that he is an employee of the Department of Defense. KnightSec begins to unravel as members start to scatter on threat of dox and arrest. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, a blog set up by @KYAnonymous presents a screen capture of an OKCupid account linked to Noah McHugh. The screen capture showed that he was online February 4th at 4:19 PM discrediting @ChannelZeroYT's account the day before (Hax0r, 2013; McElwain, 2013; Next Generation Fuckery, 2013).

### **The Trial of Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond**

In a PasteBin post, Occupy Steubenville called for silent protests by Anonymous members on the dates of the trial, March 13-15, 2013 (Guest, 2013). The trial begins on March 13 with testimony from a number of witnesses on the

intoxication level of the victim. The judge orders that no recording devices be allowed in the courtroom, but will allow a video feed when testimony would not reveal the identity of the victim (Goode & Schwebber, 2013; Welsh-Huggins, 2013).



Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond in court

On the second day of testimony, Officers with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department testified on the contents of three cell phones which were confiscated from the defendants, Mays and Richmond. Mays' phone contained two cellphone photos which showed the victim naked. Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation analyst JoAnn Gibb testified that she found over 61,000 text messages on one phone and 21,000 on the other. She then read conversations Mays and Richmond had with their friends, as well as conversations between the victim and her friends as well as conversations between the victim and Mays. The texts, many of which were peppered with crude and demeaning language, painted a picture where Mays and Richmond at first admit that they had sexually assaulted the victim then recanted and tried to produce a cover-up story. The texts also showed that the victim had no knowledge of the events of the evening of the party and was desperately trying to piece together what happened that night. It was mentioned in the testimony that Mays reportedly sent a video to the victim's father and that the High School Football Coach was taking care of things (Gray, 2013).

The third day of testimony, March 15, a student who testified in the October preliminary hearings that he witnessed the rape, attempted to invoke

his Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination when asked to relate what he witnessed. The judge denied his request and ordered him to tell what he saw. The boy said he witnessed and videoed Mays digitally penetrating the victim in the back of the car they were passengers in. He also said he witnessed Mays trying to insert his penis into the girl's mouth at their final destination that night (Collins, 2013; Gray, 2013).

The trial continued into a fourth day where the victim took the stand and recounted that she had no recollection of the events of the night after leaving the first party until she woke up with the two defendants nearby, naked under a blanket in an unfamiliar house. When presented on the stand with one of the three pictures of her recovered from cellphone evidence, she broke down, stating that she had not seen the photo before. After the prosecution rested, the defense presented only two witnesses, both former girlfriends of the victim. The defense then rested. Both sides gave their closing arguments and the judge recessed the trial stating that he would issue a verdict at 10 AM the next day (Associated Press, 2013).

On March 17, 2013, Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond were found delinquent on all three charges without a reasonable doubt. While both boys and their families wept before and after the ruling, Mays simply stated he was sorry everything happened while Richmond rose and apologized to the victim's family, who was in the courtroom. Richmond was sentenced to juvenile detention for a minimum of one year and a maximum until he would turn 21. Mays was sentenced to two years of juvenile detention and a maximum until he would turn 21. Both boys were required to attend rape rehabilitation classes while in detention, they were to have no contact or communication with the victim or her family and upon release, they would be required to register as juvenile sex offenders (Associate Press, 2013).

### **Life after KnightSec**

Immediately after court was adjourned, Ohio State Attorney General, Mike DeWine, announced that he would be forming a Grand Jury beginning April 15, 2013, to review all the evidence in the case. DeWine said state investigators had examined tens of thousands of text messages, images, videos, and talked to 56 witnesses, from teenagers who had attended the

party to school personnel. However, he said "16 people who may know something about what happened that August night have refused to talk" (Pearson, 2013, p. 1). The Grand Jury would be charged with bringing indictments against anyone else who might have participated in the rape or had knowledge of illegal activities or destroyed evidence (Pearson, 2013).

On April 17, the FBI executed a search warrant approved on April 15 on Deric Lostutter's home, removing computers, storage media and his Xbox (Chen, 2013a; Kushner, 2013). Lostutter came forward to Gawker and posted his identity on his website on June 6, in a plea for help in the case (Roy, 2013). On June 20, Aaron Bale, also known as AnonForecast, was raided at his home in Louisville, KY by the FBI in a search for evidence of participation in any KnightSec hacking activities. His lawyer claimed that Bale had no participation in any illegal activities, did not even know Lostutter, and that the FBI was participating in a "fishing expedition" (Kovacs, 2013, p. 1). By September, Lostutter had lost his longtime girlfriend, been fired from his job at Amazon after they learned of his KnightSec activities, and checked into rehab for alcoholism which was a result of the way he was dealing with the stress of the impending indictment (Chen, 2013b; Stenovc, 2013).

On October 8, 2013, the Grand Jury put together in April to review all evidence associated with the rape case, indicted the Director of Technology for Steubenville schools, William, Rhinaman, on charges of evidence tampering, obstruction, and perjury (Murphy, 2013). Later that year, in November, four more Steubenville school administrators were indicted: Steubenville City School Superintendent, Michael McVey, on a charge of failure to report child abuse or neglect; Michael Belardine, a volunteer football coach at the time of the rape, on charges of allowing underage drinking, obstruction, falsification and contributing to unruliness; Lynnett Gorman, the Principal at Steubenville Elementary School on charges of failure to report child abuse or neglect; and Seth Fluharty, a special education teacher and wrestling coach on a charge of failure to report child abuse or neglect (Bello, 2013).

## **6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Information Systems hacking activities, to include those by groups associated with

Anonymous, offer a wide range of possible research opportunities. Case Study research gathers a wide range of possible data inputs: news articles, Twitter accounts, Facebook posts, videos, PasteBin announcements, blogs and personal interviews, and consolidates them all into a greater understanding of trends and meaning of the whole. By using Google Search terms to pull in daily information feeds as well as Google Scholar posts to cross-analyze academic papers, any number of hactivist activities can be consolidated and analyzed. Current areas for research on topics related to this chapter are: cyber bullying, hacking groups, Anonymous activities, criminal activities, protest movements, social media use by teenagers and the role of recoverable social media information in law enforcement and evidence proceedings.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Social media proved to be a significant factor for KnightSec, Operation RollRedRoll, and Occupy Steubenville as well as for the town of Steubenville and its citizens. Social media transferred evidence as well as became evidence in the rape case. Tweets, texts, Facebook posts, shared photos and videos, and calls for protest and organization, all defined the operations, not only in Steubenville, but in Operation Westboro as well as Operation Hunt Hunter.

Social media has become such an integral and unseen part of our current culture, that when a light is shown on it, as in the case of the shared tweets and documents of the participants and witnesses of the Steubenville rape case, we almost seem surprised. It is a generational shift almost. The generation which has grown up not knowing anything but the instant ability to reach out and contact someone at any time, has integrated the various forms of social media communications into their culture and interactions in such a way as to be nearly transparent to one another. It is just another way to communicate; sometimes proving to be nearly the only way many communicate these days. Indeed, who uses a smart phone as a phone anymore? Why talk when you can tweet? Why drive over to your friend's house when you can instantly receive a picture of what is going on? Social media communication has in some cases become the primary means of communication for many. All this has fostered the dissociative anonymity of not only the hactivist but of ordinary citizens. Everyone feels that they cannot be "caught" therefore no one is

to blame and no consequences are the result of their actions.

However, that same reliance on social media is a double edged sword. While it facilitates the instant communication through various means, it is also a trail of crumbs which cannot easily be erased. The saying "once it is on the Internet, it's on there forever" holds very much true. The instant communication is retained by the device, or in some cases by the service being used and certainly by the person or persons at the other end of the conversation. When this communication might not be something one would want preserved for very long, if ever, then there is the risk that the transferred communications may find another audience. Such was the case in the Steubenville case where bloggers were fed snippets of conversations from the night of the rape which were preserved and distributed throughout town, across the country and around the world.

Social media is a tool. In many cases, a useful tool which does allow for instant communication with a preferred or selected audience. However, its usefulness and worth is only as valuable as the hand that creates it. Social media in each of the KnightSec operations, proved valuable for many parties; the members of Anonymous who used it to organize and communicate, the law enforcement entities who used it to discover and uncover evidence of wrongdoing and for organizers who used it to disseminate information to keep a situation from being swept under the rug. It was also a curse for those who conducted the rape, who witnessed it and did nothing, who participated in commenting on events they had nothing to do with and for those who tried to erase the communications or failed to act on issues which they were morally and lawfully obligated to act on. Social media, defined all aspects of KnightSec and eventually helped bring it to an end.

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