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Masked Protesters Aid Time Warner's Bottom Line

By NICK BILTON
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WATCH TRAILER

SAN FRANCISCO — Anonymous, the hacker group, has jostled with the Iranian government and the Church of Scientology and has briefly shut down the Web sites of Visa, MasterCard and other global corporations.

Enlarge This Image

Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

A protester in a Guy Fawkes mask at a rally in San Francisco on Aug. 15. Time Warner earns a licensing fee on the sale the masks.

When members appear in public to protest censorship and what they view as corruption, they don a plastic mask of Guy Fawkes, the 17th-century Englishman who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

Stark white, with blushed pink cheeks, a wide grin and a thin black mustache and goatee, the mask resonates with the hackers because it was worn by a rogue anarchist challenging an authoritarian government in "V for Vendetta," the movie produced in 2006 by Warner Brothers.

What few people seem to know, though, is that Time Warner, one of the largest media companies in the world and parent of Warner Brothers, owns the rights to the image and is paid a licensing fee with the sale of each mask.

The hackers wear the mask when they protest outside of Scientology buildings. And they wore it during a short-lived protest this month in San Francisco of the Bay Area Rapid Transit's decision to cut off cell service to thwart an earlier protest inside train stations.

"It's a symbol of what Anonymous stands for, of fighting evil governments," said one of the mask-wearers at that protest. The Anonymous member declined to share his name, noting that the entire concept of the mask was to remain anonymous. "You can get a mask and join the fight, too! But I heard the costume store is sold out until Friday," he said.

Indeed, with the help of Anonymous, the mask has become one of the most popular disguises and — in a small way — has added to the $28 billion in revenue Time Warner accumulated last year. It is the top-selling mask on Amazon.com, beating out masks of Batman, Harry Potter and Darth Vader.

"We sell over 100,000 of these masks a year, and it's by far the best-selling mask that we sell," said Howard Beige, executive vice president of Rubie's Costume, a New York costume company that produces the mask. "In comparison, we usually only sell 5,000 or so of our other masks." The Vendetta mask, which sells for about $6 at many retailers, is

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made in Mexico or China, Mr. Beige said.

Mr. Beige said he did not know why the mask was so popular until recently. “We just thought people liked the ‘V for Vendetta’ movie. Then one morning I saw a picture of these protesters wearing the mask in an online news article,” he said. “I quickly showed my sales manager.”

Guy Fawkes is not well known in the United States, except perhaps through the movie. But in Britain, the foiling of his antigovernment plot — he was put to death — is celebrated as a holiday, Nov. 5 or Guy Fawkes Day, and is commemorated with bonfires and fireworks.

Although the Time Warner-owned image of Guy Fawkes appeared in 2006, it did not take on its new life until much later. That occurred after members of an online message board known as 4Chan showed a crudely drawn stick figure known as “Epic Fail Guy” peering into a trash can and reappearing wearing the mask.

Then in 2008, Anonymous embraced it, explained Gabriella Coleman, an assistant professor at New York University’s department of media, culture and communication. “Thousands of members came out from behind their computer and went into the streets to protest the Church of Scientology,” she said. “Anonymous knew if they were going to meet in a visibly public space for the first time, they needed to conceal their identity. They inevitably chose the ‘V for Vendetta’ mask to do this.”

“It had a chilling effect. There were literally thousands of people standing silently in front of the Church of Scientology wearing the same Guy Fawkes mask,” Ms. Coleman said. “The photos and videos that appeared in the news from the protests cemented the mask as the symbol of Anonymous.”

Warner Brothers did not respond to a request for comment on the mask’s newfound popularity as a tool of protesters.

Alan Moore, the author of the graphic novel on which the movie is based, could not be reached for comment, but in a 2008 interview with Entertainment Weekly, he expressed how proud he was of the mask’s role in the protests of the Church of Scientology.

“That pleased me,” he said. “That gave me a warm little glow.”

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