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Hacking the Press: How Publications of the Hacker Underground Influenced the Modern News Media

Introduction

Today, the internet is the public’s primary avenue for news information. Any internet-user can read, or even post news online. News organizations have embraced the trend, using the internet as a means to get the word out quickly. However, online publications did not start with major news organizations. The current trend of online news media can be traced back to online ezines and bulletin board systems created by groups of electronics and computer enthusiasts, or “hackers”. The work done by such groups, even before the creation of the world wide web, has foreshadowed the state of online digital media, and many of the ethical and legal questions of privacy and anonymity brought by digital media today. By examining the work done by several hacker groups it becomes apparent publications created by the hacker underground have left a lasting impact in the current state of digital media.

Who Are Hackers?

The terms “hack” and “hacker” are ambiguous. Today the term is applied both to writers of simple DIY “life hacks” and to cyber-criminals who propagate computer viruses alike. Experts (including hackers) disagree over what makes someone a hacker. Even some people who commit cyber-crimes may not be considered hackers by traditionalists, as many so-called hackers do no programming or social engineering themselves, merely employing software created by others to lie, cheat, or steal. In his book, *Hackers*, Steven Levy traces the history of the term back to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MIT students once used the word Hack to describe elaborate or ingenious pranks. The first group called “hackers” were members of MIT’s Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC) in the 1950s. The TMRC utilized complex electronics to control their train systems. The club’s members developed a fascination for electrical systems, especially computers. the TMRC club members had their own words for common place occurrences such as “munged”, which meant “mashed until no good”, and according to Levy, “a project undertaken or a product built not solely to fulfil some constructive goal, but with some wild pleasure taken in mere involvement, was called a “hack”. In *Hacker Culture,* Douglas Thomas describes the development of multiple generations of hackers, united mainly by a shared “hacker ethic”. For the purposes of this paper, a hacker is any person who holds to a set of traditional hacker values called, “The hacker ethic”.

The hacker ethic is a set of beliefs that access to computers and information ought to be available to all, authority figures cannot be trusted, art can be created by computers, computers can do good things, and a hacker should only be valued by his accomplishments.[[1]](#footnote-1) The sentiment that “information wants to be free.” is often emphasized.

Hacker Publications

Hacker publications can be sampled by reading electronic magazines, “ezines” that are still maintained online, such as Technical Assistance Program, Computer Underground Digest, and Phrack. Technical Assistance Program (TAP) was a magazine created by the Youth International Party (YIP), an organization of activists who protested, among other things, the Vietnam war. According to *History of the Internet* by Christos Moschovitis, Hilary Poole, Tarni Schulyer, and Theresa Senft, because the war was funded in part by a tax on telephone usage, the yippies (members of YIP, published designs for creating devices called blue boxes.

"Phreaking in particular was intimately connected to Vietnam, Watergate, and defiance of the System: in fact, Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies disseminated a how-to guide for stealing phone service as a form of war protest."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Blue boxes were devices which could use a 2600 hertz sound to trick a phone system into allowing the user to place a free long-distance phone call. Such designs had previously published inRamparts, a magazine which mistakenly believed the publication of the designs would be protected by the first amendment. The Yippies’ first published their own designs in 1972, the same year that arpanet, an early version of the internet had been revealed to the public. According to *History of the Internet*, this activity expanded into the creation of TAP magazine, a publication that demonstrated how to hack as an act of protest,

"Yippies Abbie Hoffman and "Al Bell," inspired a later group known as TAP (Technical Assistance Program). By the time "Tom Edison" took over the TAP newsletter, its 1400 readers had shifted their interests according to changes in the phone industry: instead of building blue boxes, they were learning how to hack computerized telex switches.[[3]](#footnote-3)

According to *Hacker Culture,* TAP’s content lost interest in activism and became more technical in nature. TAP came to an end after someone stole Tom Edison's computer and set his house on fire.

The hacker ethic was dramatized in 1986 by “the Conscience of a Hacker”, better known colloquially as, “The Hacker Manifesto”. The Manifesto was written by Lloyd Blankenship, also known as "the Mentor", after being arrested for breaking into a computer system and banned from using computers. To vent his frustrations, Blankenship wrote, the Manifesto, a short essay that expresses traditional hacker sentiments, as well as Blankenship’s own frustrations with school and society at large. The Hacker Manifesto has since appeared in several movies, and the Mentor became well known amongst hackers of the time after its publication. The Manifesto was published in volume 1, issue 7, file “phile” 3 of Phrack, an online hacker underground ezine.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Phrack was run by hackers Knight Lightning (Craig Neidorf) and Taran King. Phrack served as an edited platform for hackers to share their knowledge in written text files “philes”. The site collaborated with other online hacker ezines such as Computer Underground Digest (CuD) and gathered information from hackers and hacker groups such as LOD (Legion of Doom). In 1990 Craig Neidorf was arrested for allegedly stealing and sharing AT&T’s “E911” (enhanced 911) document, which technical specifications of the United States emergency services “911” line. The United States secret service launched Operation Sundevil, a joint search for illegal possessors of the E911 document. Federal agents pointed to the theft of E911 to emphasize the need for stricter legislation on hacking. AT&T supported the raids, even sending private security employees to assist law enforcement during arrests.

"In 1990 the investigations culminate in a flurry of arrests as agents arrive, weapons drawn, at the homes and businesses of suspected criminal hackers across the country…Hackers who go by the names of Phiber Optik, Acid Phreak, Scorpion, Knight Lightning, and the Prophet, as well as the real-name figures Steve Jackson and Craig Neidorf are arrested by Sundevil agents."[[5]](#footnote-5)

Seeing as Steve Jackson games was the workplace of former hacker Lloyd Blankenship, the Secret Service raided the company’s offices for the E911 document. No copy of the document was found. Steve Jackson games later won a lawsuit against the Secret Service for property damages during the raid. The charges against Neidorf were dropped after the court discovered that the E911 document could have been cheaply and legally purchased from an AT&T office.

The operation Sundevil investigation reflects the historic trend of governments to regulate the written word. While the constitution’s fourth amendment protects Americans from unwarranted seizures of papers, the law was yet unclear with regards to digital media. During his trial, Craig Neidorf (Knight Lightning) argued, as the Ramparts did years before, that his actions were protected by his first amendment rights to freedom of speech.

Ezines such as Phrack and CuD do not follow a clear journalistic style. Phrack did not always pursue objectivity, with some “philes” being nothing more than counter-cultural rants by telecommunications writers, some detailing the writer’s views on recent events, some outlining instructions for electronic tampering, and some even including recipes for explosives. Despite this, the hacker underground publications hold true to their journalistic missions to keep their readership informed.

By the 1980s computer enthusiasts and hackers had created online bulletin board systems (BBS)s. Running alongside underground electronic journalism, BBSs were sites which allowed internet users to freely post text or documents on remote servers. This kind of internet site foreshadowed the chat-rooms, E-mail providers, and social media giants that were to come.

Main Stream News Online

As the internet grew in usage, it became an obvious avenue for news publishing. In 1996 the New York Times launched its official website, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). The Wall Street Journal followed with its own website- available only with a purchased subscription. The times had experimented with the technology. In 1994 they launched “America Online” a temporary digital news site, and proof of concept. Lary Kramer, a former newsman created a site for monitoring stock information called “Marketwatch.com” The cite was later purchased by Dow Jones. These press conglomerates followed suite after smaller, independent publishing companies took to the world wide web, such Stefanie Syman, and Steven Johnson, who created a small ezine, Feed Magazine at Feedmag.com.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Conclusion

Just social media and E-mail sites were not the first to give site visitors a platform to anonymously post media online, digital media did not begin with major news outlets. By tracing the history of online news and the history of computer enthusiast and hacker groups, the lasting impact of publications created by the hacker underground becomes apparent.

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1. Levy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. History of the Internet [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. History of the Internet [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. phrack.org [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. History of the Internet [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. How the Internet Happened [↑](#footnote-ref-6)