

# Hackers or crackers?



Luca Consoli, 24-11-2021

# Literature

- Hackers and the contested ontology of cyberspace (Nissenbaum, 2004)
- Hacking vs. hacktivism (Taylor, 2005)

# The Three Laws of Secure Computing

1. Don't buy a computer
2. If you do buy a computer, don't plug it in
3. If you do plug it in, sell it and return to step 1

Not particularly feasible in modern society. Modern (Western) society is critically dependent on networked computers

# The digital arena

- In the digital arena there is a lot of public discussion
- Agents stride to promote their views on the role, use and meaning of concepts and tools
- There is also a 'hidden' discussion going on
- Question: is the discussion about 'what is a hacker' public or hidden?

# The 'classical' hacker

- S. Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984)
  - MIT, 50's
  - Hacker: a brilliant (and quirky) programmer interested in the workings of computers
  - Out of the box
  - No bogus criteria
  - To hack: to find a way

# The 'classical' hacker

- 'true' hackers (50's and 60's)
  - Hardware hackers (70's)
  - Game hackers (80's)
  - Then something happens...
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- Hacktivists? (see second part)

# The 'classical' hacker

- P. Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age* (2001)
  - Hackers ethics as an alternative to the industrial-capitalist protestant work ethics
    - Enthusiasm
    - Creativity
    - Sharing

The culture of hacking incorporates political and moral values as well as technical ends

# Still hacking?

- ‘Hackwraak om trojan-gebruik Duitse politiepagina’ (source: [webwereld.nl](http://webwereld.nl))
  - Stratfor apparently targeted again by hackers (source: [cnn.com](http://cnn.com))
  - Beffa natalizia firmata Anonymous violato il sito segreto anti-hacker (source: [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it))
- ‘Hackers’: anti-social, possibly dangerous individuals who attack systems, damage other people’s computers, compromise the integrity of stored information, etc.



# Or cracking?

- Question: aren't these 'crackers'?
  - Cracker: a person who breaks into, or otherwise violates the system integrity of remote machines, with malicious intent
- In the 'public eye, the concept of 'cracker' has not caught up, the 'category' of 'hacker' has rather shifted in meaning.

# Why is that?

- The 'obvious' explanation: we see hackers as villains because they now are villains
- The less obvious explanation: the shift in meaning is the result of a conscious movement to demonize and portray hackers as abnormal
- The 'third way': the shift in meaning is the result of a 'manipulation of the ontology of cyberspace'

# Two opposite tendencies

- The history of the Internet is a fight between ‘anarchy’ and ‘normalization’
- The Web got more and more ‘domesticated’, and this in turn brought familiar practices and the associated norms and institutions
- The ‘classical’ hacker (or rather, the ‘classical’ meaning of hacker) represents a ‘anarchistic threat’ to corporate and institutional normalization

# Social ontology

- Social ontology: social entities and facts, in addition to natural ontology
- Examples: money, marriage
- What is the social ontology of cyberspace?
  - Hacker: agents who willfully defy the rules

# Hackers as 'bad actors'

- With the institutionalization of cyberspace comes a social ontology
- This changes the role of hackers from self-identified subculture to bad actors
- Their actions get another normative connotations (they do not need to be different actions!)
- This is the 'hidden' discussion to which we referred at the beginning

# Category shift

- Classification and standardization serve not only epistemological but also political ends
- Necessity to push hackerism out of the accepted institutional norms
- Established institutions have tried to increase the distance between hackers and the rest of us by means of an ontological transformation that reconceives hackers as deviants, and hence fair targets for repression and punitive action

# Conclusions I

- Hacking is now imbued with a normative meaning whose core refers to harmful and menacing acts
- The ontological shift is convenient for those who seek to establish control in the new order and economy of cyberspace

# From hackers to hacktivists

- Hacktivism: the combination of hacking techniques with political activism

Thesis of the paper: hacking has failed to develop its radical potential

Why?




# The limits of hacking

- Technologically focussed and politically insular
- Celebrations of computer systems for their own sake
- Has become the pursuit of technological means as an end in itself
- Hacktivism has put back a normative element into the objectified computer code

# Technological focus

## Back to 'hackers generations':

- True hackers
- Hardware hackers
- Game hackers
- Hacker/cracker
- Microserfs
- Open source movement
- Hacktivism



No articulated political position

# Parasitic character of hacking

- Gunkel (2001): hacking as parasitic activity, with 'political stasis' as a consequence
- Dependent on the 'health' of the system and on outside manipulation by those seeking to redirect the social impact of hacking (see thesis Nissenbaum)

- Hackerism: to 'reprogram the systems of rationality' **without** a definite view of social goodness of badness
- Hacktivism: to 'reprogram the systems of rationality' **with** a definite view of social goodness of badness

Next week: online Zoom  
lecture (link follows in  
Brighspace)