The Hacker Community and Ethics: An Interview with Richard M. Stallman, 2002

by **Richard Stallman**

Published in Finnish in Tere Vadén & Richard M. Stallman: Koodi vapaaksi - Hakkerietiikan vaativuus, Tampere University Press. 2002, sivut 62-80.

Hackerism

Tere Vadén (**TV**): One of the most striking features of your approach to the issues of technology and software and so on is that you consider ethical and social matters more important than possible technological advantages. While that maybe should be the norm, it unfortunately is not so. The main issues seems to be one of community; what kinds of communities different ways of using technology promote. Am I guessing right if I believe that you are thinking of ethical issues in terms of communities?

Richard M. Stallman (**RMS**): Yes. The way I reached my conclusions about which freedoms are essential for using software, and which kinds of license requirements are acceptable, is by thinking about whether they would interfere with the kinds of use of the software that are necessary to have a functioning community.

TV: The idea of free software was born out of your experiences at MIT, and how that community was infiltrated and in some sense destroyed by commercial interests.

RMS: Yes, that is correct. The hackers really enjoyed the freedom to share and change software; that was the basis for our free-wheeling community.

TV: What does the word 'hacker' mean to you, personally?

RMS: It means someone who enjoys playful cleverness, especially in programming but other media are also possible. In the 14th century, Guillaume de Machaut wrote a palindromic three-part musical composition. It sounded good, too—I think I played in it once, because I still remember one of the parts. I think that was a good hack. I heard somewhere that J. S. Bach did something similar.
One possible arena for playful cleverness is breaking security. Hackers never had much respect for bureaucratic restrictions. If the computer was sitting idle because the administrators wouldn't let them use it, they would sometimes figure out how to bypass the obstacles and use it anyway. If this required cleverness, it would be fun in itself, as well as making it possible to do other hacking (for instance, useful work) on the computer instead of twiddling one's thumbs. But not all hackers did security breaking. Many never were interested in that.
On the Incompatible Timesharing System, the operating system developed by the AI lab's hackers, we made it unnecessary to break security: we simply did not implement security in the system. The hackers realized that security would be a mechanism for the administrators to dominate us. So we never gave them the means.

TV: How about the concepts of freedom and community? There's this idea that freedom to distribute ideas, thoughts, recipes and software creates the best kinds of communities or at least better than those based on commercial limitations on distribution and sharing.

RMS: I think it is a mistake to label these restrictions as “commercial”, because that pertains to the motive for the restrictions. The same restrictions, if imposed for a different motive, would do the same harm. What matters is the restrictions, not the motive. Commercial software can be free or nonfree, just as noncommercial software can be free or nonfree. It only depends on the license.

TV: How would you delineate the distinction between the public (communal, freedom-based) and the commercial spheres?

RMS: Comparing free with commercial is like comparing happiness with purple. It doesn't make sense, because they are not answers to the same question. They are not alternatives. The meaningful comparison is between free and nonfree software.

TV: It seems that the distinction between “open source” and “free software” is that the open source movement ultimately justifies the idea on utilitarian grounds; open source is the best way of producing functional software; while the ultimate justification for free software is non-calculative, non-utilitarian; freedom is unviolable. Is that a correct interpretation?

RMS: More or less. I would say that freedom has value in itself, just as powerful reliable software does.

TV: But isn't there a problem here; one of the utilitarian calculations of “open source” is that it is more profitable—in the sense of making more money or making better software—to use an open source license than a copyleft license. A company like Apple or Nokia will adapt open source up to point, precisely the point where making it more free would turn the profitability down.

RMS: I agree that it is wrong for these decisions (about your freedom and mine) to be made by the software developer for the sake of his profit, just as the decision about whether you and I have freedom of speech should not be made by some third party for his own interests.
I am not going to condemn someone who does the right thing for the wrong reason, but it is true that relying on people to respect our freedom because it is profitable for them to do so is not a reliable system for protecting our freedom. This is the reason why we must reduce the political power of business.

TV: The argument that a company would use, of course, is that the profit it creates ultimately benefits the whole society. How would you respond to that?

RMS: That is a claim with no basis. A nonfree program can only benefit those who don't value their freedom, and thus serves as a temptation for people to give up their freedom. That is harmful to society.

TV: There is also this question of individual/private vs public/communal here. It is often in the interests of the individual to do something that threatens the community, threatens freedom.

RMS: I know. This is why we need to think about right and wrong in making our decisions, and also the reason why societies have a notion of punishing actions that hurt the community.

TV: Now, somebody like Torvalds—and we don't necessarily have to use any names here—would probably share your enthusiasm about hackerism in the sense of playful cleverness, and would take that playful cleverness also to the area of being clever in making money and enjoying the good life. Actually that is what he hints at in a recent book called “The Hacker Ethics”.

RMS: That is true. Just because someone enjoys hacking does not mean he has an ethical commitment to treating other people properly. Some hackers care about ethics—I do, for

instance—but that is not part of being a hacker, it is a separate trait. Some stamp collectors care a lot about ethics, while other stamp collectors don't. It is the same for hackers.
I agree with the person who said that there is no hacker ethic, but rather a hacker aesthetic.

TV: Now, if one wants to avoid the negative consequences of the profit-oriented business, it feels that one has to give the individual a good reason for not looking after only his or her own best. And that something, that reason, might be something in the public sphere.

RMS: Of course—but why are you treating this as if it were a new idea that can only be hinted at. This idea is thousands of years old. This is the basic idea of ethics.

TV: The question about hacker aesthetics—as you explained, there is no special hacker ethics, because a hacker can act ethically or unethically and nothing in hackerism itself necessitates ethical behaviour.

RMS: Hacking is not primarily about an ethical issue. It is an idea of what makes life meaningful. But he may be right that hacking tends to lead a significant number of hackers to think about ethical questions in a certain way. I would not want to completely deny all connection between hacking and views on ethics.

Although someone said that there was a hacker aesthetic rather than a hacker ethic, I think “aesthetic” is not quite the right word either. An aesthetic is an idea of what is beautiful. This is an idea of what is exciting and meaningful. Is there a word for that? I can think of “the hacker way”, but that sounds rather pompous and new-age.

Community

TV: Now that brings to mind several questions. For the first, one could maybe inquire after an ideal society or do forth, but let's leave that for the moment.

RMS: I approach these issues incrementally. I don't think I could try to design an ideal society and have any confidence in the conclusion. Attempts to propose a society quite different from the ones we know often tend to be disastrously flawed. So instead I propose local changes which I have some reason to believe are good. Note that I didn't imagine the free software community on my own—if I had, I would not be so confident it is a good idea. I knew that from having tried it.

TV: Is there something that digitalization offers for community-building, something that other media (like printed books) could not offer, or does digitalization mean ‘just’ and effectivization of existing means?

RMS: Computers and the web make it much easier to work collaboratively and continuing to improve publications. I think that this will become even more true in the future, as people develop better ways to do it. The proprietary mindset might as well be precisely calculated to deprive us of this benefit of the Internet.

TV: Now, from a historical and philosophical perspective it seems that many a good invention or technological advance has resulted in the intensification of colonialization

RMS: In general, technology is a good thing, and we shouldn't turn it down. Technology tends to cause cultural change. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and we should not condemn it in a blanket fashion. There are just certain specific kinds of cultural change that we need to oppose.

TV: I do not necessarily want to get stuck on this public/commercial issue, but if we say that we

need communal agreements, values and systems that tone down the selfishness of the individual, and we say that the commercial world systematically has a tendency to promote selfishness, then I guess we have to conclude that there is a crucial distinction between the communal and the commercial?

RMS: I would agree. One person can belong to a community and work in a business at the same time. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental conflict between the communitarian attitude and the commercial attitude. I would not say that the communitarian attitude is good and the commercial attitude is bad. It makes no sense to aim to eliminate the commercial attitude, because that is simply selfishness, and selfishness is vital. People must be selfish to a certain extent, just as they ought to be altruistic to a certain extent. To abolish selfishness would not make sense, even if it were possible.

TV: I mean, in many ways one could say that the communities in the post-industrial countries these days are based on commercialism, i.e., people get together, work, communicate etc. mostly because of commercial reasons.

RMS: This is a rather weak and ineffective kind of community, hardly worthy of the name.

TV: And, furthermore, like you know, the research and university community is also very tightly bound to the economical interests of the nations, states and of the companies.

RMS: Universities ought to resist being turned to commercial purposes, for the sake of their integrity. They have failed to resist. People will always be partly selfish; to keep selfishness from engulfing society, we need unselfish institutions such as universities and democratic governments to balance the selfishness and put a check on it. The problem today is that organized selfishness is taking over society, crushing the other institutions that were designed to put a check on it.

TV: But, the counter argument goes, a free market economy that seeks to maximize profit, is the only way of producing wealth and functioning democratic communities.

RMS: The free software community shows, as cooperatives in Sweden showed, that this is not true. There are other ways of producing wealth. But beyond that, producing wealth is not the be-all and end-all of a good society. There is no need to bend every aspect of life to maximizing the total wealth. The idea of sacrificing everything else to the production of wealth—regardless of who gets to share in it!—is exactly what's wrong with the WTO. As for producing functioning democratic communities, allowing commerce to dominate not only fails to do that, it is directly antagonistic to that.

TV: If ethics applies to everyone, and ethics is based on community, does this mean that there is an ideal community to which everyone should belong?

RMS: I don't think that follows.

Copyleft

TV: The concept of copyleft is a brilliant tool for the communal purposes. Could you tell a little on how you arrived at the idea?

RMS: I had seen simple notices of the form “verbatim copying permitted provided this notice is preserved”, and investigated extending this to handle modification as well.

TV: Let's take a case here. I can see that a free software developer might be able to make a living

by doing free software, because people would pay for the software, pay for the manuals, pay for the joy of being a part of the community, and so on. I don't think that is impossible. The same might go for certain musicians, even scientists and so on. But how about a writer, a poet, even a musician that works in a very limited language area—say, Finnish. Making free software or free music or free poetry will not be a viable option, because the community is too small to support that kind of activity.

RMS: The current system does rather a bad job of supporting these activities. To replace it with nothing at all would not make things much worse for these people. However, I think that voluntary methods of support could do just as good a job as the present system—maybe better.

TV: This seems to lead to some kind of “americanization” or “anglization”.

RMS: You can't be serious, can you? Don't you realize that the media-copyright complex is fueling the americanization of culture around the world? Disconnecting that complex would do a lot to improve the situation.

TV: I was just thinking of the fact that in a small language area something like copyrights actually do some good for creative work.

RMS: Not much good, though. How many Finnish writers make a living from copyright today? Note that I don't advocate the simple and total abolition of copyright for all kinds of works. See my speech, Copyright and Globalization.

Globalization

TV: You have touched on some issues of globalization is some recent interviews. One of the problems is that copyright laws put many third world countries in an unfavourable position. Do you think that those countries should not follow the copyright laws?

RMS: The US when it was a developing country did not recognize foreign copyrights. So why should anyone else? Of course, we know the reason why: it is part of a system of economic domination that the wealthiest business owners have imposed on the rest of the world.

TV: And, furthermore, could one see this issue also in terms of communities? If I remember correctly, you have said that globalization in the economic sense does not seem to be a good way of promoting or distributing well-being.

RMS: There is nothing wrong with globalization in the abstract. What makes today's form of globalization so bad is not really the global aspect of it. It is that the WTO/IMF system subordinates all other interests to the interests of business. Laws to protect the environment, public health, workers' rights, and the general standard of living, are regularly swept aside. The result is a major transfer of wealth from most people to business owners. Paradoxically, it seems to be accompanied by reduced growth as well. The best way to understand today's “globalization” is as a system to transfer power from democratic governments to business, which only incidentally happens to be global. Elimination of trade barriers could be a good thing if accompanied by global labor standards, global environmental standards, global health care, a global minimum wage (even if not uniform), and global income taxes. If these were enforced world-wide with the same energy that the US pressures countries to use for copyright enforcement, we could have global trade, clean factories, and high wages. The world-wide free software community is an example of beneficial globalization: people share knowledge with the whole world.

Ethics

TV: How is ethical “work” best done? It seems that you often invoke teachers like Buddha or Jesus as examples of a ethical way of life.

RMS: I never invoke Jesus. I am not a Christian and I don't especially admire Jesus. I admire Buddha somewhat more, but I don't invoke any teacher or hero as an **authority**, only perhaps as an **example**.

TV: It is also clear that one of the fascinating and influential features of your work is that you live as you teach. Is that a conscious decision in the sense that you think that ethics is something that can be taught best through example?

RMS: Not at all. I do write about my ethical ideas, and I would like to do it more and better if I could. Of course, it is necessary to live in conformity with one's principles, or one is a hypocrite and people can see that.

TV: If we say that the reason for ethical behavior must be given in the public sphere, let's say through a social contract or something similar, and if we at the same time notice that the economical/commercial sphere is driven by “maximum profit”-type of principles, then we have to have some sort of separation between the public and the commercial world.

RMS: I don't follow this reasoning—I see no separation. Ethics applies to everyone, and the whole point of ethics is that some things you might selfishly wish to do are wrong, so you may not do them. This applies to group selfishness just as as to personal selfishness.

TV: ... and then the commercial world would be something that almost by necessity corrupts the idea of freedom.

RMS: Business does have that tendency. Corporations provide a mechanism to distill the selfishness out of people who, as individuals, are partly selfish but also have ethics to limit their selfishness. The result is selfishness that can often be unchecked by any ethics. To change this will require taking away the power of global business over governments.

TV: Reading Steven Levy's Hackers once again, I was struck by one issue: the hackers as displayed in the book are mostly concerned with the hacker ethic in so far as it concerns “tools to make tools”.

RMS: I don't think so. A number of our programs were tools for making programs, but very few were specifically “tools to make tools”. Why were many of them tools? Because hackers writing programs get ideas for better ways to do that. What computer hackers do is program. So they get excited about anything that makes programming easier.
If a hacker does square dancing, he would get excited about anything on the computer that is helpful for square dancing. He might write a program to help people learn square dancing. This indeed has happened. A few computer hackers do square dancing, but all computer hackers program. So a few are interested in writing programs for square dancing, but many are interested in programs they can use while programming.

TV: Levy is not too hard on the point, but the unscrupulousness with which the early MIT hackers accepted the Department of Defence funding is a case in point.

RMS: Some of the hackers were uncomfortable with DoD funding at the time, but they did not go so far as to rebel against it (by quitting, say). I disagreed with them I don't think it was wrong to

accept that funding, and I did not think it wrong at the time. Corporate funding is far more dangerous.
So I would not call them unscrupulous for having accepted this funding.

TV: This reminds of the “instrumental rationality” that the Frankfurt school of critical theorists talked about; rationality that pertains to tools, but not goals.

RMS: Engineers of all kinds are famous for this; I am not sure it is more true of hackers than others.

TV: So, this brings me to the question, if ethics is about goals and about content, what exactly is the society or community that Free Software promotes?

RMS: My goal is that we help each other to live better together. Advancing human knowledge is a part of this; making sure it is available to everyone is a part of this; encouraging the spirit of cooperation is a part of this. Those goals apply to various parts of life, but in the area of software they direct one towards free software.

TV: When and how did you notice that the Tools to Make Tools-attitude is not enough?

RMS: That just tools without thinking of what to do with them is one I picked up this idea in my teens, I think. It was well known in the 60s; one did not have to be especially searching to happen across it then. I think of the Tom Lehrer song, “Werner von Braun”:

> I send rockets up, but where they come down
> is not my department, says Werner von Braun.

Lots of people heard this song.

TV: And, maybe most interestingly, how do you combine the two, the hacking that is intense and interesting and the ethical real-world work, that is often tenuous and boring?

RMS: Here you seem to assume that hacking is neither ethical nor real-world. I disagree with both assumptions. By the way, some parts of developing and releasing a working program are tedious; they are not merely boring, they are frustrating. But hackers by the thousands in the free software community do these tasks in order to release working and reliable free software.

TV: I think this is even quite common in fields like computer science, physics, mathematics, philosophy, where the austerity and purity of the formalism give an intense pleasure of a ‘non-earthly’ kind. Is there a link? Should there be? And how do you bridge the two?

RMS: Is there a link between the pleasure of pure math and the rest of life? No, I see very little connection, and why should there be one?

I enjoy folk dancing, as well as pure math. There is very little link between either of those pleasures and the rest of what I do. Why should there be? They are both harmless. Is there a “gap” that I need to “bridge”?
