

Exploring Hacker Culture

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What is a hacker? The typical stereotype of a hacker may be a young man who is seen as a loner that wears jeans and a hoody who sits in front of a computer all day long trying to steal information and money from other people. However, this stereotype does not properly depict most individuals who are associated with hacker culture. Individuals who identify as hackers are associated with a history of causing mischief and pranks as G. Coleman states in the documentary titled “We are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists” (Knappenberger, 2012). S. Levy, the author of *Hackers, Heroes of the Computer Revolution* was featured in this documentary and claims that the term “hack” was first coined to describe a type of joke. Levy also claims that the term originated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and the pranksters at this institution were often called hackers (Knappenberger, 2012). Eventually, the term hacker became synonymous with computer pranks and computer tinkering. Hacker culture varies from the perspective that it is looked upon, and there is some gray area in defining what hacker culture is, because there are many subcultures and countercultures under its wing. However, there are some general traits that most hackers share.

The most obvious piece of material culture that hackers share is the computer. The computer is the center point of this culture, and it is their most prominent tool. Beyond the computer, much can be said about hacker culture. E. S. Finch attended Def Con which is a hacker conference hosted in Las Vegas that attracts 15,000 hackers each year (Finch, 2017). First, Finch noticed that many of the people at the convention valued humor and profane language. One of the convention speakers addressed the audience with the phrase “Welcome Bitches! We are here to fuck with you” (Finch, 2017). Considering that hacker culture originated from humor and pranks, this makes a lot of sense. Second, Finch noticed that the people in attendance were competitive, intelligent and passionate about their hobby and/or profession. Many of them shared the 3-2-1 rule which means that they should get at least three hours of sleep, two meals, and one shower a day. Hackers are often so passionate about what they are doing that they forget to sleep, eat, and bathe (Finch, 2017). Lastly, Finch observed that these people took privacy and anonymity very seriously. At Def Con attendees pay in cash and are given blank name badges to write their preferred alias on (Finch, 2017).

There are also many more beliefs, values, behaviors, and roles that hackers may share. Hackers often believe that there should be a free flow of information between people, especially information that they believe should be public knowledge (Knappenberger, 2012). Liberty and freedom are common values amongst hacktivists. Hackers use these values as fuel to perform a common role. Many hackers believe it is their responsibility to expose the flaws of those with power (Knappenberger, 2012). Lastly, it is worth noting that hackers have a strong political presence. As G. Coleman states in the article titled “From Internet Farming to Weapons of the Geek” hacking and the law are tightly related (Coleman, 2017). Hacker’s values of liberty and freedom coupled with the act of hacking being closely related to the law make this culture one that is not afraid to speak their mind.

So, is the hacker community a subculture or a counterculture? It depends on which sub-group is being looked at. Hacker culture is heterogeneous, and there are many different hacker

groups (Coleman, 2012). First, hackers can be classified as white-hat hackers, or black-hat hackers. White-hats obey or cooperate with the law, and help other people find flaws in their computing systems to prevent an attack from black-hats. Black-hatters abuse and break the law to exploit these computer systems as a means of personal gains or political protest. Another two similarly defined groups are liberal hackers and radical hackers. Liberal hackers follow laws, and use their civil liberties to participate in political awareness. Radical hackers sometimes break the law, and use anonymity and freedom of speech to assist in hacking projects that are looking for justice (Coleman, 2017). Lastly, certain hacker groups have a reputation of being professional or profane (Finch, 2017). Many of the attendees at Def Con would be considered profane hackers that use provocative language that much of the general population would find unfavorable. On the contrary, the hacker organization known as the Debian Project would be considered a group of professional hackers. The Debian project is a federation of hackers that make operating system software that anybody can use for free (Coleman, 2017). The attitudes of professional hackers are more serious and heavy-hearted than the humorous and provocative profane subgroup. Overall, the answer to the question of subculture versus counterculture depends on which group or organization is being talked about. If the group is considered white-hat, liberal, or professional they could be considered a subculture. On the other hand, if the group is black-hat, radical, or profane they are probably a counterculture. Regardless of the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a hacker group, the mass media portraits all hackers as a counterculture.

The face of hacker counterculture is the group known as Anonymous. A *Fox* newscaster called Anonymous a “gang of hackers” (Knappenberger, 2012). Equally important, Coleman states that Anonymous has established itself as the most popular manifestation of contemporary geek politics (2017). The members of Anonymous do not know who the other members are, and they do not have one leader, but several leaders in different places at different times. When Anonymous represents themselves in public they wear masks, and the most noticeable symbol among this group is the mask worn by the lead role in the film *V for Vendetta*. Anonymous values chaotic freedom and believe that the internet and the information it contains should be open and free to everybody (Knappenberger, 2012). Anonymous is known for their political involvement in projects that have taken down websites, leaked private information, and assembled protests in the streets of countries across the world. They also assisted citizens in Egypt to gain access to the internet after the governments had restricted internet access during a time of political revolution (Knappenberger, 2012). Overall, these demonstrations when combined with the common values of Anonymous members can be viewed as a black-hat, profane, radical hacker counterculture that overshadows the culture of other hacker organizations.

In conclusion, hacker culture is extremely diverse, and does not always match up with its stereotype of someone trying to steal money and information from other people. Some hacker groups are subcultures, and some are countercultures. In general, hackers value anonymity and the freedom of information, thus they are often convinced that it is their role to protect the internet. Hackers are passionate about their projects, and these projects often coincide with political involvement. Although there are many hacker cultures in existence, mass-media depicts all hacker culture as the countercultural movement known as Anonymous. This may be an unfortunate reality, but it’s clear that not all hackers want to cause trouble. Varying hacker groups may have different reasons for doing what they do, but the one thing that each group shares is their passion for tinkering and technology.

References

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