....

Hacker Politics and Publics

Gabriella Coleman

In recent months, much of the world's attention has turned to Anonymous, the rhizomatic, digitally based protest movement, and WikiLeaks, the tightly controlled organization famous for facilitating whistle-blowing and publishing classified and secret materials. Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact of either of these, their interventions have already proved to be significant and notable. For instance, Anonymous has catalyzed debates as to whether distributed denial-of-service attacks are a legitimate protest tactic, while WikiLeaks has spurred often heated reflections on the changing face of journalism. These two examples of digitally based politics warrant sustained attention to provide an analysis that should also exceed, even if it draws from, the materials, such as manifestos and memoirs produced by these technological actors.

One way to start building a deeper analytic of these political forms is by comparing their different faces. On the surface, the two examples I opened with are strikingly different: WikiLeaks is associated, almost entirely, with one figure, Julian Assange, whose personality is as much the subject of news as is the exclusive organization he helped build. In contrast, Anonymous is premised on a robust antileader, anticelebrity ethic, and its operations are open to all who care to contribute. Despite these and other differences, Anonymous and WikiLeaks still belong to the same family. This association is not only because Anonymous supported WikiLeaks by launching distributed denial-of-service attacks against PayPal and MasterCard after they terminated services for WikiLeaks in December 2010; more fundamentally, they are but two examples of a much broader set of political interventions orchestrated by geeks and hackers. Although these types of politics have grown in visibility in the previous two decades, commentators tend to lack an adequate terminology by which to grasp their source and their significance.

Traditionally, many journalists have sensationalized representations of geeks and hackers by portraying them as malicious teenage boys, dwelling in their parents' basement and raising Internet hell as they channel anger stemming from psychological isolation. Nor is the significance of geek and hacker action accurately captured by one of the most prevalent sets of tropes currently used by academics and journalists to describe the digital present: the existence of a so-called digital generation or of digital natives whose sense of self and whose ethical frames are said to derive from their common use of social media technologies, like Facebook and Twitter, and digital devices, like cell phones. Digital media have certainly played a crucial role in establishing mechanisms for communication, shifting social relationships, and cultivating collective political interests, but in less tectonic ways than often assumed by the term *digital generation*.

Instead of sweeping conceptual categories that brush over the enormous plurality of digital experience, it pays to use terminology and frameworks that capture with more nuance different forms of experience, including different degrees and types of technological saturation. Although there are many different vectors by which to distinguish between different forms of political action, I signal here the political role of technological actors, such as those involved in Anonymous and WikiLeaks, that we can conceptually set apart from other users because of their closeness to the machine.

Geeks and hackers build and configure technology at work and for fun, communicate and collaborate copiously with one another using these technologies, and, most significant, derive and express deep pleasure and forms of value by inhabiting technology. These experiences shape and yet do not simplistically determine their publics, their politics, and their ethical commitments, especially since hackers do not exist in isolation but are deeply entangled in various distinct institutional and cultural webs and economic processes. I flag below some of the most notable attributes that mark their various political sensibilities, tactics, and actions.

⋯⋯⋯⋯

I cannot pretend to give anything like a thorough account of the terms *hackers* and *geeks*, but it is best to start with some basic and provisional definitions. Computer hackers tend to be skilled programmers, security researchers, hardware builders, and system administrators, and they often self-identify as such. They are generally motivated by some version of information freedom and participate in "hacker" events and institutions like the Computer Chaos Club, ShmooCon, and free software projects. Computer geeks, in contrast, may not be as techni-

cally skilled, but they are literate in digital media and have skills, for example, in video editing and design and enough technical know-how to be able to use the tools, like Internet Relay Chat, where many geeks and hackers congregate. Crucially, they also identify with digital cultural currents, and some also hold ethical sympathies, such as commitments to freedom of information, that attract them to phenomena like Anonymous, among many other sites of geeky production, culture, and action.

The language hackers and geeks frequently invoke to describe themselves or formulate political claims includes words and expressions like *freedom*, *free speech*, *privacy*, *the individual*, and *meritocracy*. This tendency is revealing in that many hackers and geeks unmistakably embrace liberal visions and sensibilities. "We believe in freedom of speech, the right to explore and learn by doing," and, explains one hacker editorial, "the tremendous power of the individual."[1] Since the commitments of hackers and geeks are not entirely of their own making, the liberally rooted political messages they herald should be familiar to most readers.

Anonymous, for instance, often conceives of the political importance of anonymity in ways that are strikingly similar to a recent Supreme Court decision in favor of anonymous speech on the following democratic grounds: "Protections for anonymous speech are vital to democratic discourse. Allowing dissenters to shield their identities frees them to express critical, minority views. . . . Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority."[2] WikiLeaks, as a recent *Economist* piece notes, acts on the basis of the liberal idea that transparency can be used in the service of limiting state power: "Rather, the silver couch-surfer's political philosophy appears [as] some sort of mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism. He thinks that the legitimate exercise of state power requires what liberal political theorists call 'public justification.'"[3] To take another example, free software developers have come to conceptualize the underlying directions of software, source code, as an example of free speech and have devised legal instruments to ensure this code remains accessible for viewing, modifying, and circulating. Hacking, so often marginalized or misunderstood in popular culture as the practice of a deviant subculture, thus in fact reveals the continuing relevance, if also the contradictions, of the liberal tradition to the digital present.

1. Editorial, "The Victor Spoiled," *2600: The Hacker Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1998 – 99): 4.
2. McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Comm'n, 514 U.S. 334 (1995).
3. W. W., "Analysing WikiLeaks: Bruce Sterling's Plot Holes," *Economist*, December 24, 2010, www.economist.com/node/21014172.

But the practices of Anonymous and WikiLeaks show that, even if hackers and geeks share ideological sympathies, they display a diverse realpolitik. This diversity of politics results, in part, because geeks and hackers labor on different objects, initiate different types of projects, and are located in many different parts of the world. They are also quite sectarian, engaging in fierce debates as to what constitutes legitimate forms of access, openness, transparency, hacking, privacy, and dissent. As with most political domains, they are bedeviled by ideological or organizational contradictions. WikiLeaks, for instance, demands transparency from the state, but the inner and financial workings of its own operations have not always followed the same nearly absolutist standards.

The diversity of hacker politics also derives from the liberal principles hackers take hold of and make into their own technical vernacular. Liberal commitments are sufficiently wide in scope and vague that they must be concretized and particularized. The diverse instantiation of liberal commitments across time and place can be thought of in terms of what Stuart Hall calls "variants of liberalism," that is, variants that not only embody internal contradictions but when compared to each other span from more radical to more conservative incarnations.[4] The liberal facets of hacking also evince these variabilities and contradictions of liberalism.

Hackers' politics, however, far exceed traditional liberal articulations, such as those of freedom of speech. Their politics convey other messages and are fundamentally grounded in acting through building: writing and releasing free software, building technical infrastructure for secure communication for use in leaking documents without fear of discovery, coding the software through which they communicate, configuring servers so as to erase logs, and, as Anonymous has brought dramatically to bear, even expressing dissent technologically. Free software hackers' insistence on never losing access to the products of labor, such as software — and indeed actively seeking to share it with others — calls to mind Karl Marx's famous critique of estranged labor: "The external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another."[5] Other traditions in hacking, for instance, enter into morally and legally gray territory, the thrill of computer break-ins (sometimes called cracking) being as much about transgression as it is about learning and exploring.

---

4. Stuart Hall, "Variants of Liberalism," in *Politics and Ideology*, ed. James Donald and Stuart Hall (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1986).

5. Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," from "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Selections," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 74.

Despite the diversity of their political actions and commitments, geeks and hackers are devising in part from their particular technical skills and life experiences novel modes for collaborating, organizing, and protesting. If, as Langdon Winner famously states, the politics of technology are about "ways of building order in our world," then hacker and geek politics are geared toward reordering the technologies and infrastructures that have become part of the fabric of everyday life.[6] A close corollary is that geeks and hackers often care deeply about and intervene in a networked infrastructure that can be, at some level, reordered without asking permission of any institution or actor. In contrast to other large-scale technologies and infrastructures, like the highway system, the Internet is to some degree modifiable and is a site of active struggle.

Policy interventions, existing technical protocols, and Internet governance certainly play central roles in shaping the contours of this contest, and there are limits to citizen-led reordering. But those geeks and hackers who channel their labor politically represent one type of privileged actor in what can be considered the cat-and-mouse dynamic currently at the political heart of the Internet. If the copyright industries use digital rights management (DRM) to control their digital content, then the response of hackers is not just to crack DRM but to initiate a robust protest movement to insist on their right to do so. If some governments engage in widespread filtering, then tools are written to route around these barriers. The privacy violations of one of the most popular social networking sites, Facebook, has helped catalyze alternatives built by hackers that are fully rooted in an explicit commitment to privacy.

This dynamic is not one of equals. Governments and corporations have more power and resources to take technology down a certain path than initiatives brought by citizens have. Attempts, for instance, to create alternatives to corporate social media applications may ultimately fail. The short history of geek and hacker politics, however, demonstrates that some of their responses and interventions have already shifted the political possibilities in the realm of law and technology and have also acted as a gateway, politicizing actors to engage in actions outside of the technological realm.

This technical orientation also means that digital literacy is often a requirement for participation in geek and hacker political spheres of action, and thus the gateways into these arenas and publics are not wide open to all. This limitation is not entirely unique to geek and hacker publics. Even the most accessible public

---

6. Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 28.

is bounded and can never reach universal status. But hacker politics and publics, like so many publics, still deploy modes of address that have wide appeal, and the liberal language of hacking also works to make hackers' messages legible to those who would not identify with these technological actors.

Additionally, many hackers also engage in efforts to increase participation. In this regard, the example of Anonymous is perhaps most instructive. Whereas the technical skills required to contribute to some sites of hacker action, such as free software, are significant, participation in some parts of Anonymous does not actually require extensive technical skill, although other parts certainly do. Those within Anonymous also collectively teach interested parties how to use the technologies, such as Internet Relay Chat, where they coordinate their actions and in so doing perhaps also make geeks of those participants who decide to don the mask of anonymity.

Geeks and hackers sometimes enter the political arena to secure their own productive autonomy. In other instances they engage in protest or politics to support principles, such as free speech. Their actions have catalyzed others, notably in the field of law and journalism, to follow suit, for instance in the creation of alternative licensing based on the idea of free software. In many other instances geeks and hackers have no desire to act politically, even going so far as to disavow politics, but the technology they make and configure embodies values, and thus acts politically. Despite the possibility of broadly identifying some of the attributes that set geeks and hackers apart politically, many unanswered questions remain: How do we posit the relationship between nationalistic hacking flourishing in places like Iran and China, where hacking is more critical of state power, and the forms of hacking addressed in this article? Are some forms of digitally based tactical action, such as distributed denial-of-service attacks, best grasped by existing terms like *civil disobedience* and *direct action*, or should we scrap that language in favor of new terms? Although in answering these and other questions we must be careful not to overplay the differences displayed by geeks and hackers, it is nonetheless imperative that we begin to think through the unique politics they have to offer.