New York University
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication
MCC-UE 1406
Hacker Culture and Politics

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In mainstream parlance, hacking is, at least is understood to be, the criminal or otherwise malicious attempt to access information that isn’t meant to be accessed. In mainstream media portrayals, individual hackers are typically portrayed either as basement-dwelling malcontents with too much time on their hands or digital MacGyvers capable of building a radioactive iPad out of paper clips and a cereal box. Even hackers themselves equivocate on the meaning and implications of the title (Thomas 2003; Coleman 2010), and there is often great animosity between whitehats (hackers who abide by ethical and legal principles), blackhats (hackers who engage in unethical or illegal behaviors) and grayhats (hackers with ambiguous motives, who may appear good or bad depending on who is looking).

As loaded as the term has become, hacking in the original sense was surprisingly value-neutral. As early as 1959, students at MIT were using the term “to hack” to describe any technological project or innovation that creatively appropriated available materials in order to make something smarter, better or more interesting (Levy 1984, 39-49). In addition to interrogating the history, ethics and technical practices of hacking, as well as examining how hackers and hacking have transformed the politics of computing and the Internet generally, this course will explore the extent to which hacking—understood more broadly as creative tinkering—inform our relationship to the social, technological and media landscape.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this class, students will explore the historical, political and technological context of hacking. Through weekly blog entries, class discussions and their final projects, students will analyze the various narratives surrounding hacking, as well as the ways in which these narratives connect to and inform their own relationship to technology. They will be responsible for leading discussions on the course readings and critically engaging the readings and class conversations.

REQUIRED TEXTS (AVAILABLE AT THE NYU BOOKSTORE)

- Thomas, Douglas: Hacker Culture
- Hyde, Lewis: Trickster Makes this World
- Levy, Steven: Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution


- Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom*
- Andy Greenberg, *This Machine Kills Secrets: How WikiLeakers, Cypherpunks, and Hacktivists Aim to Free the World's Information*

**INSTRUCTOR AVAILABILITY/E-MAIL POLICY**

I will be available for conferences before class, MW 2:30-3:30. Please email the day before so we can pick a meeting location and precise time. I will be available for individual student conferences (either in person, via NYU Classes chat or over Skype) by appointment.

I will not reply to email inquiries regarding course matters (assignment requirements, due dates, exam structure, readings, etc.) that arise from missing class or inattention to the course syllabus. You are responsible for coming to class; when you cannot attend, you’ll need to make arrangements with a classmate for notes/assignment information. You are also responsible for reading the syllabus. So before you ask me, check the syllabus to see if I’ve already answered your question. Please send all emails through NYU Classes, so I can set up an email filter for the class. This will allow me to keep better track of student messages.

**COURSE FORMAT**

Because this course is a senior media seminar, the majority of class time will be taken up with class discussion. Consequently, regular attendance and active participation are required.

**COURSE WORK REQUIREMENT**

1. Attendance
2. In-Class Participation
3. Reading Responses
4. Exams: There will be two exams—an in-class, mixed-format midterm, and a take-home essay final.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

*Discussion facilitation*

Once during the term—I will pass out a sign-in sheet on Thursday of Week 1—each student will present an overview of that day’s reading(s). The student will present what s/he considers the main points of each selection. He or she will then help facilitate the class discussion.

*Blog responses*
Students will write one 500-1000 word blog entry per week addressing and analyzing some aspect of that week’s class discussions and/or readings. First-person narration is encouraged, as is editorializing. Blog entries must be posted to NYU Classes by 10:00pm on Sunday. Students are required to respond to at least one of their classmates’ blog posts by Monday at 10:00pm (this response is part of the assignment, and is included in the point total).

Midterm

Midway through the term (week 8), students will be asked to demonstrate their knowledge of course readings. The exam will take place during class; students will be given one week to prepare.

Final research paper

For their 7-9 page final research projects, and drawing from course readings and class discussions, students will examine a specific moment of hacking spectacle. The event needn’t be a purely technological or computer-based hack; students are welcome to consider any moment—positive, negative or somewhere in between—of creative re-appropriation. If the event does not obviously meet the criteria of hacking, the student must include in his or her analysis an explanation of why this event qualifies as such. All analyses must consider the system(s) and/or principles hacked. Students will be given the opportunity to brainstorm specific paper topic ideas in class.

Graded components of final project:

- **Abstracts**: Students will turn in abstracts for their final projects on Tuesday of week 12. I will provide written feedback on each project by the end of that week.

- **Annotated bibliography**: On the same day they turn in their abstracts, students will hand in an annotated bibliography of at least 10 sources.

- **Written component**: By Thursday of finals week (5/16), students will turn in a 7-9 page research paper using at least 10 sources. Early drafts are encouraged.

- **Project presentation**: In addition to writing a paper on the subject, students will sign up for a specific 15-minute presentation slot during the last week of the term. This presentation will include a summary of the student’s findings, including any and all relevant audio-visual components.

*Complete instructions for all assignments will be discussed in class and posted to NYU Classes.*
Evaluation

Reading facilitation: 20 points
Weekly blog posts (11): 55 points total
Project abstract: 20 points
Midterm exam: 60 points
10-source Annotated Bibliography: 30 points
Final paper: 100 points
Final project presentation: 20 points

Total possible points for the term: 305

GRADING RUBRIC

A= Excellent 27-30
This work is comprehensive and detailed, integrating themes and concepts from discussions, lectures and readings. Writing is clear, analytical and organized. Arguments offer specific examples and concisely evaluate evidence. Students who earn this grade are prepared for class, synthesize course materials and contribute insightfully.

B= Good 24-26.5
This work is complete and accurate, offering insights at general level of understanding. Writing is clear, uses examples properly and tends toward broad analysis. Classroom participation is consistent and thoughtful.

C= Average 21-23.5
This work is correct but is largely descriptive, lacking analysis. Writing is vague and at times tangential. Arguments are unorganized, without specific examples or analysis. Classroom participation is inarticulate.

D= Unsatisfactory
This work is incomplete, and evidences little understanding of the readings or discussions. Arguments demonstrate inattention to detail, misunderstand course material and overlook significant themes. Classroom participation is spotty, unprepared and off topic.

F= Failed
This grade indicates a failure to participate and/or incomplete assignments

A = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B = 84-86
B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79
C = 74-76
C- = 70-73
D+ = 65-69
D = 60-64
F = 0-59

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Absences and Lateness**
More than two unexcused absences will automatically result in a lower grade. Chronic lateness will also be reflected in your evaluation of participation. Regardless of the reason for your absence you will be responsible for any missed work. Travel arrangements do not constitute a valid excuse for late work. There are no extra credit assignments for this class.

**Format**
Please type and double-space your written work. Typing improves the clarity and readability of your work and double-spacing allows room for me to comment. Please also number and staple multiple pages. You are free to use your preferred citation style. Please use it consistently throughout your writing. If sending a document electronically, please name the file in the following format Yourlastname Coursenumber Assignment1.doc

**Grade Appeals**
Please allow two days to pass before you submit a grade appeal. This gives you time to reflect on my assessment. If you still want to appeal your grade, please submit a short but considered paragraph detailing your concerns. Based on this paragraph I will review the question and either augment your grade or refine my explanation for the lost points.

**General Decorum**
Slipping in late or leaving early, sleeping, doing homework, eating, researching unrelated topics on the internet, etc. are distracting and disrespectful to all participants in the course.

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**
http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/policies/academic_integrity
The relationship between students and faculty is the keystone of the educational experience at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. This relationship takes an honor code for granted and mutual trust, respect, and responsibility as foundational requirements. Thus, how you learn is as important as what you learn. A university education aims not only to produce high-quality scholars, but to also cultivate honorable citizens.
Academic integrity is the guiding principle for all that you do, from taking exams to making oral presentations to writing term papers. It requires that you recognize and acknowledge information derived from others and take credit only for ideas and work that are yours.

You violate the principle of academic integrity when you
- cheat on an exam,
- submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors,
- receive help on a take home examination that calls for independent work, or
- plagiarize.

Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated.

Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score, and/or other materials that are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following:
- copy verbatim from a book, an article, or other media;
- download documents from the Internet;
- purchase documents;
- report from other’s oral work;
- paraphrase or restate someone else’s facts, analysis, and/or conclusions; or
- copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.

Your professors are responsible for helping you to understand other people's ideas, to use resources and conscientiously acknowledge them, and to develop and clarify your own thinking. You should know what constitutes good and honest scholarship, style guide preferences, and formats for assignments for each of your courses. Consult your professors for help with problems related to fulfilling course assignments, including questions related to attribution of sources.

Through reading, writing, and discussion, you will undoubtedly acquire ideas from others, and exchange ideas and opinions with others, including your classmates and professors. You will be expected, and often required, to build your own work on that of other people. In so doing, you are expected to credit those sources that have contributed to the development of your ideas.

Avoiding Academic Dishonesty

- Organize your time appropriately to avoid undue pressure, and acquire good study habits, including note taking.
- Learn proper forms of citation. Always check with your professors of record for their preferred style guides. Directly copied material must always be in quotes;
paraphrased material must be acknowledged; even ideas and organization derived from your own previous work or another's work need to be acknowledged.

- Always proofread your finished work to be sure that quotation marks, footnotes and other references were not inadvertently omitted. Know the source of each citation.
- Do not submit the same work for more than one class without first obtaining the permission of both professors even if you believe that work you have already completed satisfies the requirements of another assignment.
- Save your notes

**Student Resources**

- Students with physical or learning disabilities are required to register with the [Moses Center for Students with Disabilities](#), 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980) and are required to present a letter from the Center to the instructor at the start of the semester in order to be considered for appropriate accommodation.

- Writing Center: 411 Lafayette, 3rd Floor. Schedule an appointment online at [www.rich15.com/nyu](http://www.rich15.com/nyu/) or just walk-in.

**Class Schedule**

The following is a “working schedule.” Class materials are subject to change based on the interests, understanding, and general pace of the class. It is your responsibility to keep on top of any schedule changes, whether you are in class or not.

For full participation credit, all assigned essays must be read/commented upon by class time on the appointed date.

All assigned readings are either available in the bookstore, in NYU Classes or online. Readings are located on the Resources Page, and are nestled under the appropriate theme folder (the theme corresponds to that day’s discussion; make sure you’re looking in the correct folders).

**Week 1 January 28-February 1:**

**Defining Terms**

*Tuesday*

Introduction

Discuss course trajectory, books

*Read for Thursday:*
• “No, ‘hacker’ really does mean ‘hacker’” [hyperlink](http://erratasec.blogspot.ca/2012/08/no-hacker-really-does-mean-hacker.html)
• Biella Coleman, “Hacker” entry from Johns Hopkins Encyclopedia of Digital Media (available on NYU Classes)

Thursday
Choose reading facilitation schedule
Discuss hacker definition
The hacker figure in film and television

Read for Tuesday:
• Read Steven Levy. *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (available as a free ebook through Project Gutenberg)

Homework for Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

---

**Week 2 February 4-February 8:**
Early Days and Phone Phreaking

---

Tuesday
(begin student discussion facilitations)
Discuss Levy

Read for Thursday:
• Ron Rosenbaum, “Secrets of the Little Blue Box” from *Esquire Magazine* [hyperlink](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/the_spectator/2011/10/the_article_that_inspired_steve_jobs_secrets_of_the_little_blue_.html)
• Ron Rosenbaum, “Steve Jobs and the Little Blue Box” [hyperlink](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/the_spectator/2011/10/steve_jobs_and_the_little_blue_box_how_ron_rosenbaum_s_1971_arti.single.html)

---

Thursday
Discuss Phone Phreaking
Read for Tuesday:

Homework for Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

---

**Week 3 February 11-February 15:**
The Next Generation

---

Tuesday
Discuss Thomas

Read for Thursday:
• Douglas Thomas *Hacker Culture* (parts 2 and 3: Hacking Representation and Hacking Law)

**Thursday**
Discuss Thomas  
*Read for Tuesday:*
  • Steven Levy, Epilogue in *Hackers*  

*Homework for Tuesday:* Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

---

**Week 4 February 18-February 22:**  
**Free and Open Source Software**

**Tuesday**  
Discuss Levy, Stallman  
*Read for Thursday:*
  • Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom*: Intro, Chapter 2

**Thursday**  
Discuss Coleman  
*Read for Tuesday:*
  • Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom*: Chapter 5, Epilogue

*Homework for Tuesday:* Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

---

**Week 5 February 25-March 1**  
**Free and Open Software part II + Ethics**

**Tuesday**  
Discuss Coleman  
*Read for Thursday:*
  • Brian Pfaffenberger, “If I Want It, It’s OK: Usenet and the (Outer) Limits of Free Speech.” (available on NYU Classes under “Resources” tab)

**Thursday**  
Discuss Pfaffenberger  
*Read for Tuesday:*
  • Lawrence Liang “Beyond Representation: The Figure of the Pirate.” *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*  
  • John Biggs “Avast, Me Hearties: How The Pirate Bay Changed The Way We Steal”  
Homework for Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

Week 6 March 4-March 8
Piracy or Content Liberation?

Tuesday
“You wouldn’t download a car” PSA
Discuss Liang and Biggs
Read for Thursday:
  • Jonas Andersson, “The origins and impacts of Swedish filesharing: a case study, JoPP”  
    http://peerproduction.net/issues/issue-0/peer-reviewed-papers/the-origins-and-impacts-of-swedish-filesharing/
  • Rasmus Fleischer, Pirate Party Speech https://torrentfreak.com/piratbyran-speech/

Thursday
No class meeting
Homework for Tuesday:
  • Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

Week 7 March 11-March 15
Pirate Party

Tuesday
Discuss Jonas, Fleischer
Midterm exam prep
Homework for Thursday: Prepare for midterm exam

Thursday
IN-CLASS MIDTERM EXAM
Homework for spring break: Start reading Greenberg and Mueller

Week 8 March 18-March 22
SPRING BREAK, no classes
Read for Tuesday:
  • Andy Greenberg, This Machine Kills Secrets: How WikiLeaks, Cypherpunks, and Hacktivists Aim to Free the World's Information [chapters TBD]
  • “Lines in the Sand: Which Side are You On in the Hacker Class War”

Week 9 March 25-March 29
Anonymity as Dissent, Anonymity as Culture

Tuesday
Discuss Greenberg and Mueller
Brainstorm final project ideas
Read for Thursday:
  • Lee Knuttila, “User unknown: 4chan, Anonymity and Contingency.” First Monday
  • David Auerbach, “Anonymity as Culture: Treatise.” Triple Canopy
    http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__treatise

Thursday
Discuss Knuttila, Auerbach
Watch Chris Poole’s “The Case for Anonymity”
Read for Tuesday:
  • Coleman, Gabriella, “Our Weirdness Is Free. The logic of Anonymous—online army, agent of chaos, and seeker of justice” Triple Canopy
    http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free
  • Coleman, Gabriella, “Am I Anonymous?” Limn http://limn.it/am-i-anonymous/

Homework for Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

Week 10 April 1-April 5
Anonymous

Tuesday
Discuss Coleman
Read for TUESDAY:
  • Deseriis, Marco. “Is Anonymous a New Form of Luddism?”
    http://www.thething.it/snafu/?p=711
    http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2012/07/ff_anonymous/
  • Anonymous, “Digital Sit-ins: DDOS is legitimate civil disobedience.”
Thursday
CLASS CANCELLED DUE TO HORRIBLE TORTURE
Suggested viewing: We Are Legion (Brian Knappenberger 2011)
Work for Tuesday:
- Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday
- Start working on abstracts and 10-source annotated bibliography

Week 11 April 8-April 12
Craft and Craftiness

Tuesday
Discuss Marco and Norton
Read for Thursday:
- Gabriella Coleman, “Craft and Craftiness” from Coding Freedom
- Lewis Hyde, Introduction and selections from Trickster Makes this World

Thursday
Discuss Coleman and Hyde
Work for Tuesday:
- Finalize abstracts and annotated bibliographies

Week 12 April 15-April 19
Hackers as Trickster

Tuesday
**Abstracts and 10-source bibliographies due in class
Abstract workshops
Read for Thursday:
- Gabriella Coleman, “Phreakers, Hackers, and Trolls and the Politics of Transgression and Spectacle” (on NYU Classes)

Thursday
Discuss Coleman
Read for Tuesday:
- Judith Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community”
- Julian Dibbell, “A Rape in Cyberspace”
Due on Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday
Week 13 April 22-April 26
Trolls and the Trolls Who Troll Them

Tuesday
Discuss Donath and Dibbell

Read for Thursday:


Thursday
Discuss Phillips

Read for Tuesday:

- Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Detournement”
  http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm
  http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html

Due on Tuesday: Post 500-1000 word blog entry by 6pm Sunday; respond to at least one blog post by 6pm Monday

Week 14 April 29-May 3
Media Jamming and Spectacle

Tuesday
Clip from Stephen Colbert’s 2006 White House Correspondent’s Dinner speech
Discuss Debord, Kellner
Sign up for Week 15 project presentations

Read for Thursday:

- Gary Kiyama, “The Original Mad Men.”
  http://www.salon.com/2011/10/21/the_original_mad_men/
- McKenzie Wark, “How to Occupy an Abstraction”
  http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/728-mckenzie-wark-on-occupy-wall-street-how-to-occupy-an-abstraction
- Bakhtin, Mikhail “Rabelais and his World.” Cultural Resistance Reader.
- Adbusters, “What is the Carnivalesque Rebellion?”

Thursday
Discuss readings; watch clips from “The Yes Men” (2003) and “The Yes Men Fix the World” (2009)

Due next week: Project presentations! (rule of thumb: to ensure a thorough analysis, you should be about 80% finished with research and writing)

Week 15 May 6-May 10

Tuesday
First half of student presentations

Thursday
Second half of student presentations

Week 16 May 13-May 17

CAMPUS-WIDE READING DAY; NO CLASS

Final Exams May 15-May 21

Final exams will be due via email during our scheduled exam time, Thursday 5/16 from 4-6pm