E59.1406
Hacker Culture & Politics

OVERVIEW

This course takes as its object computer hackers to interrogate not only the ethics and technical practices of hacking, but to examine more broadly how hackers and hacking have transformed the politics of computing and the Internet more generally. We will examine how hacker values are realized and constituted by different legal, technical, and ethical activities of computer hacking—for example, free software production, cyberactivism and hactivism, cryptography, and the prankish games of hacker underground. We will pay close attention to how ethical principles are variably represented and thought of by hackers, journalists, and academics and we will use the example of hacking to address various topics on law, order, and politics on the Internet such as: free speech and censorship, computer gaming, privacy and security, and intellectual property.

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

This will allow us to critically 1) problematize thinking on computer hackers as a socio-cultural group guided by a singular ethic and set of practices 2) examine the multiple ways hackers draw on and reconfigure dominant ideas of property, freedom, and privacy through their diverse moral codes and technical activities 3) broaden our understanding of politics of the Internet by evaluating the various political effects and ramifications of hacking 4) and examine a few cases of activities and practices “on the borders” of hacking but that are centrally inspired by its techniques and ethics. Class will be conducted as a seminar. Students will be responsible for leading discussions on the readings and critically engaging the readings and class conversations.

ASSIGNMENTS & EVALUATION

Class will be conducted as a seminar and I have structured the assignments to encourage active and engaged class discussions focused on the readings. Students will be responsible for leading discussions on the readings and should critically engage the readings and class conversations. Because this is a seminar course, regular class attendance is required. You are allowed two unexcused absences. After this, your grade will drop by one half letter for each missed class.

To aid in discussion and improve your writing skills, one of the main assignments for class is to turn in a total of eight response papers (2-3 pages in length) where you will (1) provide a summary of the thesis and argument of each reading for the day's class in about one page (2) and provide a critical engagement with the text in the rest of the paper. On
the days you are not required to turn in a paper, you will be required to post at least one question about the readings. More details provided below. In addition, you will have one short take home essay question based on a reading and a documentary we are watching in class. You will be required to post one blog entry about the class discussion and readings, and there will be a take home final exam.

Bi-Weekly Questions and Response Papers: 25%
Blog Entry: 15%
Essay Question: 15%
Class Participation: 20%

Final Exam: 25%

EVALUATION

A = Excellent
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
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
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.

Plus and minus grade indicate the standing within the above grades.

More Information about the Weekly Response Papers and other Writing Assignments

How will this work exactly?
Half of you will be placed at random into Group A and the other half in Group B.

Group A: Will turn in the response paper on and for Monday's class and turn in a discussion question for Wednesday's class
Group B: Will turn in the main paper on and for Wednesday's class and turn in a discussion question for Monday's class.

The paper and question should be sent to me via email no later than 11:30 A.M on the day they are due. You should also post them to our Blackboard site and bring a paper copy to class. All submitted work must be typed, double spaced, and paginated in 12-point Times New Roman font, and submitted in Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, or OpenOffice format. The student's name, date, and response paper number should appear on the first page, and pages should be numbered. You should save the document in the following way before sending to this email address biella.class@gmail.com (Lastname-PaperNumber.doc. For example, mine would look like: Coleman-Paper1.doc, Coleman-Paper2.doc, etc.)

The essays will be graded with a letter grade and returned to you usually within a week or two.

I will be circulating example essays the first day of class and they will be posted on BB. As you will see, I expect enough of a summary of the main arguments and methods to convince me that you have actually done the reading as well as some critical and direct engagement with the texts and arguments. The essays should be checked for spelling and grammar and written well. Feel free to bring in related questions and material so long as it is done in a manner that directly engages with the text.

You will only have to turn in a total of eight response papers and six questions and the lowest grade will be dropped. My only provision is you cannot turn in an essay for the last week of class as the reading assignments are quite light.

Why are you doing this?

Practically speaking, for the here and now: On the one hand, this may seem a little torturous as you will have to give yourself enough time to read and write before the start of many (though not all) classes. On the other hand this assignment will help you read actively and critically so that you are well prepared for class discussion, which is the cornerstone of this class (and is 25% of your final grade).

Practically speaking, for the future: By the end of the semester you will also be able to write a short but engaging essay, which includes summary and analysis, in a short period of time, which is a skill that I hope will be useful in the future.

Philosophically speaking: When I teach a seminar based class, I want it to be true to its spirit: we are in class to collectively engage in a discussion, exploration, and debate concerning the readings and the issues they raise. For a seminar to really work, students
must do the readings and have a shared set of references to bring to the table. Otherwise, we are just talking about our general opinions, thoughts. I structured the assignments not only to encourage participatory learning but to build the necessary foundation for this seminar to run properly

Blog Entry

We have a class blog STDIN, which is meant primarily for class documentation but can be used in any number of ways. I will post videos I show in class, for example, and students should feel free to post any material or entries they would like so long as they are related in some shape or form to this class. However, the only required assignment is to post one entry after class that provides a summary of the readings in relationship to the issues and questions that we discuss in class. I encourage students to quote from class response papers and questions. You are especially encouraged to connect the readings and our class discussion to current debates about law, technology, computer, intellectual property, access, etc. Here are some good sites to visit for material: http://slashdot.org/ http://boingboing.net/ http://digg.com/news/technology

You should post the entry within 48 hours of the end of the class. We will be drawing names to assign students to particular classes/dates.

Blog URL: http://blogs.nyu.edu/blogs/gc69/stdin/
Instructions:
“Note: Anyone to whom you wish to assign extra privileges on your blog must complete an initial login to the blog server. They do not need to create their own blog, but they need to log in at least once so that the blog server populates the authorized user list with their NetID. You won't see the person in the list until they have logged in at least once. Please pass on the instructions in our Quick Start Guide.”
For me to add you as a user of the blog, you need to first log-in to NYU blogs. Please follow the directions on this page:
http://blogs.nyu.edu/archives/2007/03/quickstart_guide_getting_start_1.html

Note: For me to assign extra privileges on our class blog, you must complete an initial login to the blog server. You do not need to create their own blog, but you need to log in at least once so that the blog server populates the authorized user list with their NetID.

Go here to learn how to login and I will then hopefully be able to sign you up:

http://blogs.nyu.edu/archives/2007/03/quickstart_guide_getting_start_1.html

Take-Home Essay Question:

More details will be given closer to its due date but it will be a 5 page essay based on a short reading (Ingold) and a documentary (BBS) that we will be seeing/reading on October 8th. Comment: Will this be in-class or take home?
Readings

Most of the readings are available online or on the class Blackboard site. Please print all readings and bring them to class. The following texts are available for purchase at the NYU Bookstore:

Doctorow, Cory, Little Brother

Graeber, David, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology

Nugent, Benjamin, American Nerd: The Story of My People.

Stephenson, Neal Snow Crash

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. If you have a concern about any of the materials, please speak to me.

Week I.

1. Wednesday

During the first meeting we will discuss the syllabus, goals, and requirements of the course. I will also discuss what won't (unfortunately) be covered.
1. Monday: The MIT Hackers and Hacking as Craft

Levy, Steven
1984  Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution [pp 17-49, 70-90, 102-017, 115-123]

Sennet, Richard
2008  The Craftsman [pp. 8-11 50-52, 240-252, 262-265; optional but recommended and included on BB: 37-45]

2. Wednesday: Phone Phreaking and Pranking

Rosenbaum, Ron
1971  “Secrets of the Little Blue Box.” Esquire Magazine
http://www.webcrunchers.com/crunch/stories/esq-art.html
or http://www.lospadres.info/thorg/lbb.html

Sterling Bruce,
1992  “Crashing the System.” The Hacker Crackdown
http://sunsite.nus.sg/pub/crackdown/crackdown_4.html

Hoffam, Abie
1971  Steal this Book [Read the Introduction and pick one category under Survive!]
http://www.tenant.net/Community/steal/steal.html

Visit and listen to one of the audio files on the following site:
http://www.wideweb.com/phonetrips/
or play around here http://www.projectmf.org/ which allows you to “blue box” telephone calls legally. For those that cannot get enough and want to learn more, check out: http://www.historyofphonephreaking.org/

Week III.

1. Monday: Homebrew Club, Hardware Hacking, and the Personal Computer

Nelson, Theodore
1974  "Computer Lib / Dream Machines [very short selections]

Levy, Steven
1984  Hackers [pp. 201-243]
SAMPLE SYLLABUS – This syllabus is provided as a sample. Some course content may vary.

Friedman, Ted  

Markoff, John  
2006  “A Strange Brew's Buzz Lingers in Silicon Valley.” New York Times (March 6)

2. Wednesday: Poor Man’s Networking, Free Speech, the Concentration of Power, and a First Look at the Special Class of Technologists: “The Sys Admin” **

Pfaffenberger, Bryan  
1996  “If I Want It, It’s OKº: Usenet and the (Outer) Limits of Free Speech.” The Information Society

Peter, John Durham  
2005  Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition [selections from Introduction and Chapter 3 pp. 9-22; 123-136]

Week IV.

1. Monday: The Underground and the Pleasures of Eating the Forbidden Fruit

Sterling Bruce  
http://www.dina.kvl.dk/~abraham/crackdown/crackdown_5.html#SEC5

Nietzsche, Friedrich  
1872  Birth Of Tragedy [selections]

Jack Hitt and Paul Tough  
1990  “Is Computer Hacking a Crime?” Harpers Magazine

2. Wednesday: Hacker Underground, Continued

Thomas, Douglass  
2003  “Hacking as the Performance of Technology: Reading the Hacker Manifesto.” Hacker Culture

Thomas, Douglass  
2003  “Representing Hacker Culture: Reading Phrack.” Hacker Culture

Read as much Phrack as you can stomach, including at least one of the following:
Week V.


   Hedbidge, Dick

   Michael Warner
   2002 “Publics and Counterpublics.” Publics and Counterpublics


   Levy, Steven
   1984 “Epilogue.” Hackers [pp. 415-430]

   Stallman, Richard

   Litman, Jessica
   2001 “Copyright Basics” Digital Copyright: Protecting Intellectual Property on the Internet

   Hesse, Carla

Week VI.


   Kelty, Chris
   2008 Two Bits the Cultural Significance of Free Software
   Introduction: http://twobits.net/discuss/introduction/14
   Chapter 6: http://twobits.net/discuss/chapter6/20

   Helprin, Mark
   2007 “A Great Idea Lives Forever, Shouldn't its Copyright?”
2. Wednesday: BBSes and Dwelling in Technology

Ingold, Tim

In class documentary: BBS [http://www.bbsdocumentary.com/](http://www.bbsdocumentary.com/)

Essay 1: Handed out at the end of class. Due on Monday morning

Week VII.

1. Monday:

   NO CLASS, School Holiday. Essay due.

2. Wednesday: UNIX **

Kelty, Chris
2008 “Sharing Source Code.” Two Bits
[http://twobits.net/discuss/chapter4/18](http://twobits.net/discuss/chapter4/18)

Stephenson, Neal
1999 In the Beginning was the …. Command Line

Week VIII.

1. Monday: Code is Art and the Art of Code **

Black, Maurice
2002 “At the Edge of Language: The Art of Code”

Chopra, Samir and Scott Dexter

“Why learning Haskell/Python makes you a worse programmer” [closely read the first few paragraphs and then skim the rest]
[http://lukeplant.me.uk/blog.php?id=1107301645](http://lukeplant.me.uk/blog.php?id=1107301645)
2. Wednesday: Code is Law: Rethinking the Politics of the Internet and Access

Lessig, Lawrence
2007 “Open Code and Open Societies.” Perspectives on Free and Open Source Software

Winner, Langdon
1986 “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” The Whale and the Reactor

Listen to before class:
http://www.democracynow.org/2008/6/25/from_political_prisoner_to_cabinet_minister

Week VIII.

1. Monday: Breaking the Law and Hacker Representations in the Media

Thomas, Douglass

Poulsen, Kevin
2008 “Teenage Hacker Is Blind, Brash and in the Crosshairs of the FBI”

Listen to before class:
http://www.thefifth-hope.org/mp3/mitnick-1.mp3
http://www.thefifth-hope.org/mp3/mitnick-2.mp3

2. Wednesday: Games and Play

Dibbell, Julian
2006 Play Money [½ book]

Levy, Steven
1984 Hackers [pp. 50-69]

Suggested Reading:

Dibbel, Julian
2008 “Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World.” Wired Magazine
http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/magazine/16-02/mf_goons?currentPage=all
**Week X.**

1. **Monday: Games and Revisiting the Pleasures of Hacking/Gaming**

   Dibbell, Julian  
   2006  
   Play Money [rest of book]  

   Nussbaum, Martha  
   2004  
   “Mill between Aristotle & Bentham.” Daedalus  
   http://www.utilitarian.net/jsmill/about/20040322.htm

2. **Wednesday: Privacy**

   Zimmerman, Phil  
   1999  
   “How PGP Works/Why Do You Need PGP?” High Noon on the Electronic Frontier  

   Levy, Stephen  
   1999  
   “CryptoRebels.” High Noon on the Electronic Frontier  

   Doctorow, Cory  
   2007  
   Little Brother [1/3 of book]

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**Week XI.**

1. **Monday: Privacy, Continued**

   Doctorow, Cory  
   2007  
   Little Brother [rest of book]  

   George Radwanski  
   2001  
   Privacy Commissioner releases finding on video surveillance by RCMP in Kelowna  
   http://www.privcom.gc.ca/media/nr-c/02_05_b_011004_e.asp

   Vaidyanathan, Siva  
   2008  
   “Naked in the 'Nonopticon' Surveillance and marketing combine to strip away our privacy.” Chronicle of Higher Education  
   http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i23/23b00701.htm

2. **Wednesday: ARRRRR Piracy**

   Watch at home before class: “Steal This Film”  
   http://www.stealthisfilm.com/Part1/
Week XII.

1. Monday: Social Organization

   **Guest:** Karl Fogel who is a Free and Open Source Software Developer, author of “Producing Open Source Software,” and founder of http://www.questioncopyright.org/

   Coleman, Biella
   2004 “The (copylefted)Source Code for the Ethical Production of Information Freedom.”
   Sarai Reader.

   Fogel, Karl
   2005 Producing Open Source Software. [selection]

   Shirky, Clay
   2008 “Failure For Free.” Here Comes Everybody

2. Wednesday: Old and New Net Wars: Hackers, Geeks, Anonymous, and Scientology (another look at Free Speech)

   Grossman, Wendy
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1997  “Copyright Terrorists” net.wars  
http://www.nyupress.org/netwars/contents/contents.html

Landers, Chris  
2008  “Serious Business Anonymous Takes On Scientology (and Doesn't Afraid of Anything)”  

Week XIII.

1. Monday: Representing Hackers in Film

Movie: Necrocam

2. Wednesday November 26:

Class Canceled for Thanksgiving Holiday

Week XIII.


Coleman, Gabriella  
2005  Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software  
http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704

Graeber, David  
2004  Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology

Suggested Reading:

Finnegan, William  
2003  “The Economics of Empire: Notes on the Washington Consensus.”  

2. Wednesday: Nurdly (Geeks, Hackers, Freaks, and...)

Nugent, Benjamin  
2008  “American Nerd: The Story of My People.” [Read all of Part I and in Part
II read pp. 141-183]

Seltzer, Sara
2008 The (girl) geeks stands alone. Bitch Magazine

Week XV.

1. Monday: Graffiti Research Labs, A Political, Open Source Technology

   Watch Video at Home: GRL the First Season
   http://graffitiresearchlab.com/

2. Wednesday: Understanding Hacker Humor, Understanding Web Comics, One
   Final Look and Wrap Up

   Wrap up with some humor: geeky comics (xkcd, Dinosaur Comics, etc.)

McCloud, Scott
1993 Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art [Short selection TBD]

   http://www.linuxkungfu.org/images/fun/geek/project.jpg
   http://xkcd.com/269/
   http://geekz.co.uk/lovesraymond/archive/gmail-behind-the-scenes-deleted-scenes
   http://xkcd.com/149/
   http://ars.userfriendly.org/cartoons?id=20070406
   http://xkcd.com/242/
   http://xkcd.com/225/
   http://ars.userfriendly.org/cartoons?id=20010113
   http://geekz.co.uk/lovesraymond/archive/gpl-killed-the-mpaa-star
   http://www.qwantz.com/archive/000004.html
   http://www.qwantz.com/archive/000802.html
   (these last two are geeky for its form, not content)
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