

Hackers leap from dark basements to world stage

October 10 2014, by Glenn Chapman



A file photo from November 2013 shows a person claiming to speak for activist hackers Anonymous, subject of a new book

Hackers are shaking off their reputations as nerdy, loner basement dwellers and rebranding themselves on the world stage as members of Internet age tribes with offbeat codes of conduct and capricious goals.

Clans of hackers such as Anonymous, LulzSec and Lizard Squad have

caused havoc—and made news—in recent years, but the legacy of the online community stretches back decades.

"People think of hackers as non-social people who live in the basement; that is not true at all," said Nico Sell, chief executive of the encrypted messaging service Wickr and the longtime organizer of the DEF CON hacking conference.

"To be good at hacking, you have to understand how society and people work. These geeks are not your normal geeks."

Rebels united by their hacking prowess and identified by sassy pseudonyms have been divided into "white hat" groups that use software skills for good and their "black hat" rivals intent on anything from pranks and political upheaval to espionage or crimes of profit.

Hackers share their stories and skills at forums like DEF CON and in Internet chat venues such as privacy-guarding 4Chan, according to Gabriella Coleman, who holds the Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy at McGill University in Canada.

"There are many reasons one can call hackers a community," said Coleman, whose book "Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous" will be released in November.

"One layer is just their craft: they are building stuff or breaking stuff. The technology is so complex you rely on the help of others to get things done in a serious way," she told AFP.

Next year will mark the 23rd annual DEF CON gathering in Las Vegas. The event—considered the world's biggest hacker conference—was started by Jeff Moss, known by the handle Dark Tangent, as a farewell party for a hacker friend about to leave the country.

Valuing craftiness, humor

In hacker groups such as Anonymous, amazing code or stunning exploits are revered and personal glory-seeking abhorred, according to Coleman.

Humor—cracking jokes, pulling pranks and even embedding jokes in source code—is common.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg pictured in India, October 9, 2014. The social network's campus takes the hacker mindset as its theme

"There is a love of craftiness and cleverness, and displaying it is a marker defining their identity and binding them together," Coleman said.

Ritualized ways of displaying humility in hacker tribes include leaving it

to others to brand one a hacker—never taking the name for oneself. There is a high value placed on weirdness.

Taboos include being an informant. DEF CON has long had a "Spot The Fed" game with prizes to those who finger undercover police infiltrating the gathering.

Working for the computer security industry is not frowned on, but doing shoddy work certainly is.

The pseudo-anonymous nature of Anonymous allows for a diverse array of people to belong—some in roles with nothing to do with coding, such as tweeting, making videos or organizing rallies.

"There are people from radically different classes and ethnic backgrounds, and a strong ethic not to seek fame and recognition for your actions is heavily enforced," Coleman said.

From 'trolling' to activism

Coleman traced the roots of Anonymous to 4Chan, where bonds forged over sharing the funny, offensive or grotesque grew from "trolling" to underground activism.

"There is a sense of being in the trenches together, battling," Coleman said.

Anonymous evolved into a platform for launching political operations, with high-value targets related to censorship, corruption and privacy.



Actress Natalie Portman at the premiere of V for Vendetta in New York, March 2006. The film's Guy Fawkes mask is used by hackers Anonymous

The group "was known for pranking and hell-raising, and now it is known for activism," Coleman said.

It combined technical prowess with Hollywood presentation, and adopted the Guy Fawkes mask—seen in the film "V for Vendetta"—as its symbol.

Hackers often run in groups but tend to be a giving community—as apt to teach visitors to pick locks or create educational games as they are to hack a major firm's network to prove it is flawed.

"You don't have the same posturing you do in other societies, because you are judged on your merits," Sell said.

"The rock stars are the ones who have brought great things to everybody—for free."

DEF CON hacker creed includes not hurting anyone needlessly, and giving software makers time to patch chinks in their armor before making vulnerabilities public.

"Hackers don't always follow the rules, but that is different from having integrity and ethics," Sell said.

Defenders of the hacker culture maintain a defining credo is to push systems until they break and then find compelling new ways to put them back together.

Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg made the [hacker](#) mindset a theme at the leading social network's campus in Silicon Valley, where the street address is One Hacker Way.

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