

Hacktivism: E-Power to the People

By Gordon Young

“Unjust laws exist: Shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?”

—Henry David Thoreau,
Civil Disobedience, 1849

Dissent and civil disobedience have a new face in the wired world. “Hacktivism” is a fusion of social activism and computer hacking technology. Using modern—and sometimes illegal—hacking technologies, activists have brought traditional non-violent protest practices of blockade and trespass to the Internet, making the Net a new and wide-reaching political platform. Since about 1995, as activists have become more computer literate and hackers more politically aware, Hacktivism has grown and become an organized, structured, and increasingly powerful force for social change.

Hacktivism Tools

Anyone can be a hacktivist. Participating in a protest is as simple as logging onto the Web site of a target organization with your Web browser, then bombarding the server with repeated requests for information. Hacktivist organizations, like the Electronic Disturbance Theater (www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html), announce the time and date for these protests on their Web sites. If enough people participate in these electronic sit-ins, the target Web sites can be so bogged down they become useless—the same way an office building could become useless if thousands of protesters sat on its floors.

FloodNet is a hacking tool that automates this type of protest. Individuals interested in participating in a protest download the FloodNet Java

applet, then run it inside their browser. It sends several Page Refresh commands per minute to the target site.

On Mexican Independence Day, 1998, nearly 8,000 protesters joined in the Electronic Disturbance Theater’s assault on the Web site of Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, in support of Zapatista rebels in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

Hacktivism can be combined with standard protests, as was done by the ElectroHippies (www.fraw.org.uk/ehippies) during the 1999 World Trade Organization summit. Supporting the “Battle in Seattle,” they organized a virtual sit-in of the WTO’s Web site, hindering attempts to respond to the thousands of protesters swarming the streets.

Activism and Organizing

The Internet is used for social activism in less aggressive ways. Activists complain that the mainstream media is simply more big money in action—since it costs a lot of money to run a newspaper chain or television network, these media are owned and controlled by the rich, and news coming from them is filtered and slanted to deliver only the message the rich and powerful want the people to receive.

Alternative news sites like the Independent Media Center (IMC, www.indymedia.org) use the Net’s amazing power to distribute information cheaply to post daily news stories with a slant opposite that of the corporate-controlled media. IMC carries stories you’ll never hear on the nightly news, like activist news from Africa, a continent in turmoil that the U.S. news seems to miss. Hacktivists have their own online newsletter and forum, The Hacktivist (www.thehacktivist.com).

Activism has always meant orga-

nizing, and the Net is a cheap, fast, and effective tool for this essential task. E-mail keeps activists in touch, even when they travel, and allows free exchange of hacking programs and information. Digital chat rooms allow virtual meetings between individuals all over the world, and anonymous arms-length interviews with the press to get their message out. Cell phones are crucial in organizing real-world demonstrations, connecting activists as near as a city block or thousands of miles apart.

Destructive Weapons

There are some powerful and destructive weapons in the hacking arsenal. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks take over several widespread servers, then use them simultaneously to bombard a victim server with a barrage of e-mail from many different sources. Staggering under the unexpected weight, the victim server can slow down drastically or crash completely. The victim server can be offline for days until technicians can restart and reconfigure the system, reprogramming it to ignore incoming mail. Unlike electronic sit-ins, it takes only a handful of operatives to carry out a DDoS attack, and the software has actually been “canned,” and can be downloaded by anyone.

There are many more common weapons available. Viruses, e-mail bombs, Trojan horse programs, worms—all could be used against a corporation, government, or other offending organization. But dedicated Hacktivists know better than to attack anything they can—to do so could well defeat their own purpose.

Hacktivism’s Future

Civil disobedience works only when it pricks the conscience of a nation, drawing attention to injustice that might otherwise be ignored, and shifting public opinion away from support for the status quo. Failing this, it can be dismissed as simple vandalism, performed by a small

group of malcontents—an image its opposition will strive to foster. So Hacktivists, though they might have the power to disrupt corporate or government operations on an ongoing basis, try to be careful about how and when they use their skills.

Some activist groups do use aggressive direct action. A Chinese dissident group called the Hong Kong Blondes fights human rights abuses in China by attacking the communist government and the Western multinational corporations that increasingly

do business with it. It has mounted thousands of DDoS attacks. The group's most notorious exploit was the temporary crippling of a Chinese military communication satellite. With the help of the Cult of the Dead Cow—one of the oldest hacking organizations—the Hong Kong Blondes claim to have infiltrated the communist's computer systems so totally that the group is able to warn fellow dissidents of impending arrest.

Hactivism is likely to increase. For one thing, it's effective if enough

people support it. For another, the first generation of people to grow up online is now in their mid-20s to mid-30s—for many, years of intense political activity. As more young Americans grow up in a digital culture, the computer-literate population base for activist organizations to draw from will grow, as well. And as the Internet grows and becomes more and more a part of government, business, and pretty much anything else, the better a target it will be. □