

# Bad Subjects

Political Education for Everyday Life

*The Bad Subjects*

*Production Team*



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# Hackers, Order, and Control

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What governments should really fear is a communication expert. / —SubCommandante Marcos, EZLN Leader

The highway is alive tonight  
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes. / —Bruce Springsteen

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Since the 1980s, “hacker” has been a contested term in arguments about how people should understand computer technologies which are rapidly becoming a part of corporate office work and middle-class entertainment in the US. Films such as *War Games* popularized the idea that young men with technological skills might gain access to power through computing. Books like Steven Levy’s *Hackers* explained that hackers work together, and hold community values that influence what people do with technology. Ceaseless newspaper stories caviled about the Internet Worm and the unintended implications of new communication technologies. These narratives were early attempts to articulate the workplace conditions of a new generation of workers, for whom “control” could often seem an out-of-date concept.

The term “hacker” itself quickly became unclear, because a wide range of people wanted to appropriate it for their own uses. Some computer-industry CEOs like Steve Jobs, Mitch Kapor and Bill Gates were identified as hackers, presumably to associate their corporations’ work with a mystique of “genius.” Technology writers attempted to redefine the term in ways which laundered and legitimized it—in one case actually claiming the word to be a condensed form of “ha[rd wor]ker.” Young hackers tended to acknowledge more openly (inside the community, at least) the illegal nature of a number of common hacker practices. But the popularization of the term tended to consist of appropriations from outside actual hacker culture itself.

Dorothy Denning, in her 1990 report “Concerning Hackers,” notes a disparity between two definitions of “hacker,” and attempts to reconcile them by concluding that all definitions boil down to experimentation

with technology: "A hacker is someone that experiments with systems. . . . [Hacking] is playing with systems and making them do what they were never intended to do." The dramatic growth of the Internet has made inclusive definitions like Denning's problematic for "hackers" who actually interact with one another on-line—since, according to her definition, anyone who feels s/he works "hard" and "innovates" with "technology" may be a hacker. And hacker communities have had diverse responses to Denning's work. For example, in the debates last year among hackers who oppose "Clipper" cryptography, many people were frankly derisive of her understanding of the issues. Denotative efforts such as Denning's give hacker communities few ways to articulate their diverse interests. But there should be no doubt that people who are good with computers disagree with one another.

This isn't to say we should accept the libertarian and individualist theories popular among hackers, though. Today's hacker communities are profoundly social places. In the 1980s small groups established themselves across the ARPANET to collaborate and share new techniques for making computer systems "do what they were never intended to do." Some of these are well-known today, such as *z600* and *C.u.D.* which have migrated to mailing lists, USENET newsgroups, web pages and other public sites. But many of the practices "hackers" used in the 1980s are still illegal today, and public sites are therefore poor locations for discussions about them. Popular and professional writings about the Internet in the past eighteen months have dramatically increased public awareness of "disorder" on-line, focusing upon illicit activities to a degree never found before. Several writers who had written utopian accounts of the Internet in the period between 1988–92 have recently recanted: for example, Cliff Stoll, in his 1995 *Silicon Snake-Oil*, presents a much more pessimistic view of the Internet community than he did in *The Cuckoo's Egg*.

But community not only exists on-line, it is useful to people who spend a lot of time there. Systems of circulation and distribution are inordinately complex, and communities that can make sense of the complex institutional relationships which form the Internet are valuable to people who work there. In his 1991 book *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson argues that people need "cognitive maps" of the social terrain on which we live. Likewise, hackers need groups to help them make sense of the on-line social world, because cyberspace is simply so damned complicated that it would be hopelessly confusing for anyone to "map" it alone. But hackers do face a problem defining who is or is not a hacker, since there are few theoretical or social tools which are sufficiently flexible to help understand the communities which hackers create.

This problem isn't exactly new. Denis Diderot wrote an open letter in early 1761 about his novel *D'Alembert's Dream*, which he had circulated among confidants the previous year. It states: "I have heard in recent weeks from people I never expected to have heard of the novel that it is being discussed in salons throughout Paris. . . . If you want to encourage more texts like *D'Alembert's Dream*, you must consider the

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dangers to authors of circulating their writings so widely, and I would ask you consider not circulating that text at all." Diderot feared the possibility of arrest or interference which often awaited those who wrote against Church-sanctioned views, but he also wished to circulate his work among like-minded colleagues. Using *salons* to circulate copies tended to keep texts within the community, but as the boundaries of that community grew unclear, he became increasingly—and understandably—uncomfortable.

The Internet has brought contemporary writers and theorists back to some of the issues Diderot faced. We need to look at the hacker issue from the perspective of Diderot-like practitioners, people who are seeking to articulate the problems of operating within non-dominant modes of thinking and behavior. Some proposed solutions to the "Diderot problem" in the hacker world are to redefine legality or to refine the definitions of community membership. There is currently one underground "hacker" organization that publishes a journal of technical information useful to hackers, *C&N*. The *C&N* introduction to their September 1, 1995 edition is worth quoting at length:

NEVER mention this list (or any part thereof) in any public or non-secure transmission. Specifically this includes non-elite BBS's and the Internet (all areas no matter how private you think it is—it isn't). NEVER leave this on a storage medium in a non-secure/non-elite environment. Never use this list in public. The *C&N* list and/or portions thereof has been mentioned/posted to/transferred over the Internet . . . more than a few times in the last year or two!!! This has resulted in some developers taking action by re-engineering their copy protection—some even going so far as to trash files on your system if you try to use our information. This is extremely annoying to those of use who actually produce or gather this info. If this continues to happen this list will become useless—we will not allow this to happen as we will simply not distribute it to as wide a channel (by using serialization, encryption and key distribution if necessary) and you (especially the assholes causing the problems) will never see another list again.

Diderot's problem again: *C&N* may fall into the "wrong" hands. Clearly, this problem of boundary maintenance affects more than intellectual communities. Mike Davis writes in *City of Quartz* about how the political geography of Los Angeles has led to gated suburbs and slums "fenced in" by pedestrian-impassable highways. The mass media employ slightly more clever forms of discrimination—using the rhetoric of "consumer choice" to differentiate between "mass" and "elite" media cultures, television offers us divisions between broadcast-TV networks like Fox, and cable networks such as A&E or CNN. Computer hackers, the avant-garde of corporate capitalism (as the 1960s generation of hackers has demonstrated in their rise throughout the 1980s into management), recognize the possibility of even more subtle mechanisms of differentiation—serialization, encryption, key distribution, etc.

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But how are hackers to think about membership? These people don't know one another by sight—they can't use white carnations or secret handshakes—so what can be done to define the “safe users” group? Hackers desperately want cultural tools to define more clearly who is “in” and who is “out.” And they don't have them yet.

A more recent Diderot, Eric Raymond, has worked to unify the discourse around hackers, removing the potential areas of conflict by creating his own version of “the encyclopedia.” Raymond is the current editor of *The Jargon File: An Online Hacker's Dictionary*, a “comprehensive compendium of hacker slang, illuminating many aspects of hackish tradition, folklore, and humor.” *The Jargon File* claims to present the most important values of “hacker” communities, and argues that there exists an urgent need for more denotative stability among computer professionals. It has a tremendously large reading audience: my own server, which publishes it, serves over five thousand copies per month. The compelling interest of this work, however, lies in the rhetorics it employs to evangelize for “hacker” values. “Earlier versions of *The Jargon File*,” Raymond writes in the introduction, “played a central role in spreading the hacker language and the culture that goes with it to successively larger populations, and we hope and expect that this one will do likewise.” But Raymond's work, like Dorothy Denning's, doesn't serve capitalist market differentiation the way “enclave” responses like encryption might. It doesn't produce radically specialized and effete markets.

The hackers' problems with community definition and differentiation should be of interest to bad subjects on-line because the problems faced by small groups of so-called “hackers” in the 1980s now apply to many groups springing up on-line who need to define themselves and delineate “appropriate” and “inappropriate” community values. If neither Diderot's nor *C&N*'s solutions are adequate to theorize group social relations, we may end up with the definitions of Internet community so popular in the past twelve months: figuring all network users as mere consumers, as frontiersmen/homesteaders, or as people-who-just-happen-to-be-on-the-Internet. All of these definitions avoid difficulties of identity which arise on-line.

Hackers have long understood that popular culture is less than helpful in theorizing their problems. Clifford Stoll, well-known in 1988 for his experience with hackers who “cracked” his Berkeley computer system, published an article later that year titled “On the Risks of Dealing with the Press,” about his difficulties with John Markoff, the *New York Times* technology reporter who broke the story in the popular press, and who has also been thoroughly critiqued in the December 1995 hacker magazine *Computer Underground Digest* for continuing sensationalism about hackers. Writers such as Philip Elmer-Dewitt, who worked with Marty Rimm on the startling “Cyber-Porn” issue of *Time*, is similarly critiqued by computer hackers who recognize the danger of provoking dramatic or paranoiac responses to the problems caused by poor circulation systems of illicit information on-line.

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As media theorists such as Janine Jackson have explained in some depth, the popular press today needs people who can explain and represent on-line experience accurately. In a few cases, well-known hackers have come forward to speak directly about their work and experiences — as in the March 1990 issue of *Harper's*. But these are “former” hackers, and are rare. The much-discussed *Time* magazine “Cyber-Porn” piece cited a Carnegie Mellon University researcher, and in subsequent coverage of the debate, both by *Time* and independent sources such as the site at Vanderbilt University, academics such as myself were contacted to contextualize and “make sense” of the problems and issues involved. This is an important first step in making sense of a powerful, and diverse, underground community.

The *Bad Subjects* community began with a critique of liberal humanism and the callow belief that we all should be able to “get along.” Those of us who recognize elements of the hacker enclave debates from our own social and political work, must also participate in these debates to problematize Diderot’s, *C&N*’s, *LA*’s, and *A&E*’s attempts to respond to liberal humanism with market segmentations derived from dominant culture. If we’re going to use the Internet for progressive projects, we’ll need better theories of the social.