

Hacks, cracks, and crime: An examination of the subculture and social organization of computer hackers

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation examines both the subculture and social organization practices of computer hackers. The concept of normative orders (Herbert, 1998: 347) is used to explore hacker subculture in different contexts (Herbert, 1998: 347). To assess hacker social organization, I use Best and Luckenbill's (1994) framework of organizational sophistication as well as measures from Decker et al. (1998). The relationships between subculture, social organization, and behavior are explored as well. I collected three qualitative data sets to explore these issues, including posts from six on-line hacker discussion forums, in-depth interviews with active hackers, and field observations at the Defcon 12 hacker convention. These data were triangulated and used to investigate the research questions.

The findings suggest the social world of hackers is shaped by five normative orders: technology, knowledge, commitment, categorization, and law. These orders are interrelated, and overwhelmingly influenced by technology. Furthermore, hackers tend to perform hacks alone, but have relatively loose social networks that are used to share information and introduce subcultural norms to new hackers. These networks are couched in a larger hacker community that provided access to a variety of resources and materials. Finally, this analysis demonstrates the dynamic relationships between subculture, social organization, and behavior. I found that subculture and social organization structure the nature of deviant relationships, norms, and behavior. At the same time, the nature of deviant acts appears to influence social organization and subculture. I also discuss the implications for research on computer hackers and crime generally.