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## 'DoO NOT HACK'. RULES, VALUES, AND COMMUNAL PRACTICES IN HACKER AND MAKERSPACES

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This paper explores which rules and values are relevant to contemporary practices of hacking and making. It examines how members in *hacker-* and *makerspaces* conceptualise their communities and their use of digital technology. Based on interviews with community members in England, observations of physical spaces and online message boards, it shows how rules, social values, and communal practices are interrelated.

Hackerspaces (also called hackspaces) and makerspaces are physical locations where community members meet in order to engage in and discuss activities such as programming and electronics construction. While the public perception of hacking as illegal activity is common,<sup>1</sup> hackerspace members understand and pursue hacking mainly as creative interaction with digital technology.<sup>2</sup> Hackerspaces have a great potential to facilitate creativity and IT literacy, and to act as hubs for (digital) civic engagement and learning.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, while feminist hackerspaces have received increased attention more recently, it is important to recognise that such spaces often suffer from a gender bias as male-dominated communities.<sup>4</sup> Expertise as it is acquired and maintained in such spaces facilitates new forms of civic participation.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the term hacking is still closely associated with illegal activities, immoral use of information technologies, and breaking into closed systems. In computer science education and for trainings targeted at an employment in the field of IT security, educational institutions and service providers have even suggested the term 'ethical hacking' in order to dissociate 'legal' from 'illegal hacking' (cracking).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the term *makerspace* has become more common during the last years: It refers to communities which are (in many ways) similar to hackerspaces, while avoiding the negative connotations of 'hacking'.<sup>7</sup>

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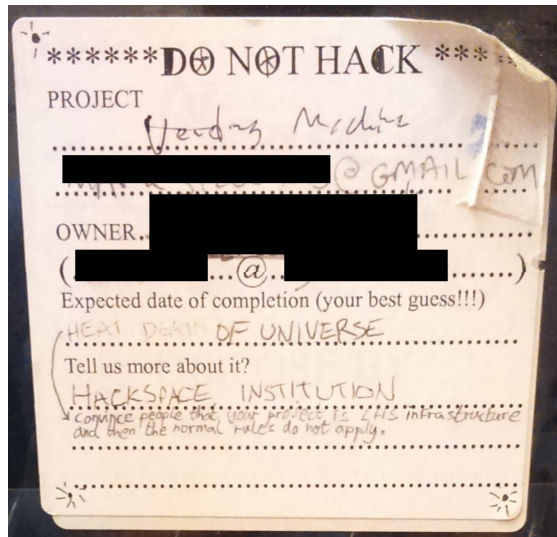


Figure 1: 'Do not hack' sticker at London Hackspace.  
Photo taken by the author (August 2016)

In order to contextualise my research, I will first provide a brief overview of the different understandings of hacking<sup>8</sup> and of the debate regarding differences between hacker- and makerspaces. Secondly, I will highlight the ethos of hacking and making, and how these practices relate to legal rules regarding digital technology. Going back to the hacker ethic, depicted by Levy in 1984, hacking is rooted in the fundamental conviction that individuals need to be able to deconstruct technology, to 'take it apart', in order to understand how it works, to acquire knowledge, and to use this for future innovations.<sup>9</sup> This assumption has fostered a strong connection (or rather vast overlaps) between hacking and making communities and free and open source projects.<sup>10</sup> Levy explains the need for non-proprietary, open systems: 'If you don't have access to the information you need to improve things, how can you fix them? [...] The best way to promote this free exchange of information is to have an open system.'<sup>11</sup>

However, as Coleman and Golub (2008) point out with reference to Elias Ladopoulos (Acid Phreak 1990): there is no *universal* hacker ethic, but rather ethical diversity among hackers. The authors describe how '[...] hacker morality in fact exists as multiple, overlapping genres that converge with broader prevailing political and cultural processes, such as those of liberalism'.<sup>12</sup> Hence, this paper also contributes to the discussion of the multiple meanings of hacking and its ethos.

With regards to technology interaction in hacker-/makerspaces, hacking can be understood as concept and practice which implies pushing boundaries and predefined modes of usage, but does not involve illegal activity. Firstly, this paper will hence examine which technology is utilised in hacker- and makerspaces, and which rules and values apply to related practices. Secondly, it aims at going beyond an investigation of technological activities: It will explore the communal values and issues emerging in such

spaces, e.g. concerning efforts towards inclusivity and self-governance. On community websites such as the *London Hackspace Wiki*, it is for example stated that '[a]s hackers we hate making rules almost as much as we hate following them, so we really want to keep the number of rules to a minimum.'<sup>13</sup> Rules are seen as ironically unavoidable (rather than desirable) elements for maintaining the community. This has e.g. led to the common practice of labelling stored items with 'Do no hack' stickers in order to prevent that they are utilised by other members (see Figure 1). Overall, by investigating the rules and values relevant to hacker- and makerspaces, I aim at contributing to a better understanding of normative assumptions guiding members' individual and communal practices.

My paper will present the results of interviews with members of two hackerspaces and one makerspace in England (London and Oxford). This approach will be combined with observations of the physical community spaces as well as their online message boards and general websites. Based on this material, I will discuss how members conceptualise their communities and their personal engagement. On a methodological level, I will also reflect on the development that Internet research already has expanded and needs to expand even further to approaches which are not limited to e.g. on-screen content, but look into spatial, material interaction between humans and digital technology.

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