

Hackmeetings, Hacklabs:Technopolítica for Neophytes

Alfonso Gómez

*Hackers? I don't think so, just lovers of freedom and technology, I don't see myself feeling proud of getting into this computer or that one or of being the best at programming or running systems, I'm interested in programs and programmers when their code lines weave webs that increase the common good. The bugs I never stop looking for are the ones in the system governing us and I know that the exploits going through them will not be found by a Lone Ranger, we all have to build them together. Or maybe that is being a hacker, not just using computers but having the curiosity and the desire to learn how things work and modify them yourself as a whole, they are necessary in and outside the web. How do they say it? Oh, right! **Hack your mind.***

Remarks by a participant in the "hackiluro" (Hackmeeting held in Mataró 2006)

Hackmeetings and Hacklabs are assembly meetings, held autonomously. They are self-managed and build networks from a technophile's standpoint to foster social change.

Hackmeetings are annual encounters for an entire community. In accordance with the philosophy that underlies these spaces, we attempt to make no separation between organizers and participants. The event is planned via an open mail list. Chats are held and debates about which political topic will be the theme for the Hackmeeting. The local group hosting it works hard to set up the meeting space and prepare everything for three intensive days.

The spaces at the Hackmeeting define its essence. We have the infopoint, which is the permanent spot where the whole event is coordinated. That's where all the protocols can be obtained, which were previously chosen at an assembly. They are necessary so that all the nodes work properly during the meeting. Talks are held in several rooms, because there are quite a few of them and on a variety of topics, due to the diversity of interests at Hackmeetings. The other hub at a Hackmeeting is the local area network or the gizmo zone, where people connect to exchange knowledge, explore the web, and share cultural material. There is a place to relax, a place to sleep, a place to eat, and many other spaces to meet the needs of the participants.

Since the first Hackmeeting was organized on the Iberian Peninsula in 2000, after two had been held in Italy, this imported activity has been held in different cities on different years, creating or strengthening the spaces that will provide continuity to all the projects launched during the meeting. These projects are the Hacklabs.

For the first time, simultaneous transcontinental Hackmeetings were held in 2006, in Mataró, Santiago de Chile, and Chicago.

Hacklabs are physical spaces where people who love computer science and new technologies strive to make them available to the larger community in the physical world around them. These people see technology as inextricably linked to problems in the "real world", a tool for dealing with them. These people, in contrast to those who have the childish elitist belief that more knowledgeable people are superior to others, are aware that

true strength lies in collective knowledge. They aim to knock down the walls that separate them and share their knowledge, certain that this will help everyone grow. For that reason, they are not content to hide alone at home behind their computers. Instead, they look for ways to get together in spaces where they can build a meeting point where they can overcome the limits of the web and turn their intentions into concrete actions. There are courses, symposia, workshops, and everything imaginable to make progress along a road we are only beginning to see ahead of us.

Hacklabs are based on the understanding that defending freedom is fundamental to this objective. People meet to build a space where information is seen as something that belongs to everyone. It loses value and keeps people chained when it becomes property held exclusively. However, when it belongs to everyone, it grows and makes people free.

Since the first Hackmeeting was held in Barcelona, the web of Hacklabs has been growing, with new nodes joining in all over the peninsula. From the Balearic Islands to Galicia, from Malaga to Bilbao, over two dozen Hacklabs have been in operation for seven years now. They hold numerous activities, each according to its own circumstances. Talks and symposia are common to all, as is "hacking the streets", a way of carrying out the goal of making the streets a public and political space, a place to hack in order to get it back from the hands of the market.

The relationship among Hacklabs, Hackmeetings, and social centers with squatters has existed quite naturally since the beginning, due to the similar management systems they have. However, this is not a dogma, so it is not unusual to find that some of them have rented a place so they have more stability to their space, avoiding the repression social centers with squatters face.

In addition, in 2005 a campaign called "Compartir es Bueno" (Sharing is Good) was started as a response to the increasing criminalization that public powers and the music industry are bringing against people who share culture using the Internet. Throughout 2005 and 2006, many events have been held in different cities that have resulted in a strong campaign based on one of the basic tenets of Hacklabs: copyleft and free culture.

Just as Hackmeetings have become international, Hacklabs are also beginning to take place in other parts of the world, such as London and Santiago de Chile, in addition to numerous Italian Hacklabs.

All these projects and spaces have run into many problems and much uncertainty, some of which is shared by many other collectives and others are the result of the strong experimental nature of these experimental spaces. In the former, we find that the space is a basic problem, because whether rented or occupied by squatters, keeping a self-managed space going in the face of private and public powers is a real tightrope act. Other common problems are dispersion, both physical and mental, which are commonplace in the Postmodern Western world.

The biggest problems of our own are many participants' lack of experience in collectives and the fact that there very little ideological unity in these spaces. However, these difficulties are also Hacklabs' greatest virtues, namely the willingness to experiment to reinvent new forms of political participation in these times when so much is changing.