Hacknight

In-between self-organization and the space of an institution

PALLE TORSSON

I am a member of the hackerspace *Sparvnästet*, a self-organized group of people who explore, play, and tinker with technology. This text is my personal and subjective understanding of the joint effort of Sparvnästet and The National Museum of Science and Technology (Tekniska Museet) to organize a “hacknight,” a weekend hacker and maker conference at the museum.

Sparvnästet decided to organize a hacknight, an open and free creative technology around-the-clock conference, and the first of its kind in Stockholm. The hacknight took its blueprint from hacknights organized annually by *Forskningsavdelningen*, a hackerspace in Malmö. For Sparvnästet, the aim of the project was to create a public event of learning and experimenting with open technologies, as well as an event for the existing network of Swedish hackerspaces to come together and manifest. Sparvnästet also aimed to spark discussions around crucial issues of the network society and net politics, like privacy and surveillance.

Similar hacker events link groups and individuals from different backgrounds including arts, politics, and technology – to an international hacker community, which includes a net-political agenda and a discourse of democracy, freedom, openness, and transparency.

The following statement summarizes the point Sparvnästet made when we tried to

explain the purpose of the hacknight to a local newspaper:

Now that technology is becoming increasingly part of our life, it is more important than ever with free and open systems. It is about power. If you are dependent on technology that you do not understand, you put control over your life in the hands of others. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how these systems really work in practice to be able to relate critically and, in the end, build better solutions.¹

To organize the event, Sparvnästet approached Nils Olander, curator at The National Museum of Science and Technology, with a proposal. He was excited about the idea and later on became a key person in the realization of the event, as he was very committed to making it happen. The event was solidified at consecutive meetings held at the museum; Olander resolved the internal politics, was active in helping out with many bits and pieces of the actual event, and communicated back and forth with the museum offices on our behalf.

However, aiming for net-political empowerment is something that The National Museum of Science and Technology did not seem to have on their agenda. Olander told us that the museum wanted to use hacknight as a project to test their plans to establish a science center with experimental workshops and maker

fairs. My impression was that the museum offices were excited about the project, but also concerned about their image. There seemed to be a willingness to realize the event, but, at the same time a consideration for the risk of being associated with the image given to hacking in public media.

To mitigate possible damage, the museum used different strategies. Behind the scenes in the museum, the word hacking was discussed; it was questioned whether it would fit their image at all. Ultimately, the museum was able to let it pass into the press release by emphasizing experimentation.

Another interesting difference was manifested in the museum press release and the information Sparvnästet provided. The press release emphasized individual experimentation and was formulated to make the event look cuter by using the words “fascination” and “figuring”. The complete description was as follows: “An event for all curious people who are fascinated by disassembling, assembling, and figuring out how things work.”²

One particular word, lock picking, was dropped from the press release. Lock picking is the craft or hobby of unlocking a lock without the original key by manipulating the lock with small hooks and picks. While not mentioned in the press release, the lock picking station was open at the event itself, and proved to be very popular. This points to a process of institutional policy, and what the institution can say openly in a press release vs. what they are willing to let happen.

In contrast, Sparvnästet indicated a strong relation between technical exploration and politics on the hacknight website: “Because the technology you don’t understand owns you, the technology that is unexplored owns us.”³

To contrast the public image of hacking as an illegal malicious activity, Sparvnästet

emphasized the hacker exploration as a vital part of democratisation and participation processes in a technology dependent society, because it questions and uncovers otherwise hidden agendas and processes. The museum instead used a smoothing strategy to lower potential conflict with the public, sanding the edges of exploration off to make the event more acceptable in the public eye.

HACKNIGHT

Over two days and one night in August 2012, Sparvnästet and the museum ran the around-the-clock hacknight at the National Museum of Science and Technology. With lectures on anonymisation and net politics, workshops in Arduino, lock picking and web development for activists, and open tables for exploring techniques and knowledge sharing, hacknight was a way to manifest and open up an extended creative hackerspace culture in Sweden. It was a success and the event attracted a versatile crowd of around 250 participants.

The space used for hacknight was an old stable painted white and lit up in blue neon. Between the pillars on the side, a fake chandelier hung from the double high ceiling. By arranging chairs and tables, Sparvnästet divided the room into two zones: one part was dedicated to hangout, projects, and workshops and the other to presentations on a stage. It was a conscious division between informal and formal parts of the program, opening up the room for a range of activities and attracting a range of different visitors.

The open table area created small groups that engaged in their own or collaborative projects. More initiated visitors easily took part in various activities, but some of the regular museum visitors seemed to struggle to find a way to engage. Were they lost in the

120 habits of observation while looking for more specific directions and instructions of what to do? The way to learn here was to explore things as they appeared in front of you, with help from some basic instructions. The workshops were open for everyone, but it became clear that one needed some basic skills or interest to fully participate.

In the evaluation after the event, Sparvnästet reflected on the difficulties in handling the various skills and interest levels of the crowd. There was obviously a difference in how visitors engaged with the space: by guidance or spontaneously, from a distance or close, with a consumer or observing attitude, or with participatory engagement. Sparvnästet's goal was to close the gap between those who knew the codes of engagement and the visitors from the public who were unfamiliar with hacker culture. To meet the needs of the range of visitors, hacknight provided a span of low and high threshold activities. The lock picking was a great example of a low threshold activity, as all you had to do was just join in. The *NFC* (*Near Field Communication*) tag workshop was instead a good example of a high threshold activity, as special hardware, software, a laptop, and special knowledge was needed. As with many hacking explorations, this was done in a legal grey zone where the exploration must move into a semi-private zone.

It became clear that the event expanded the semi-private community of Sparvnästet into a public space. The public museum made a reversed journey into the semi-private community of Sparvnästet's extended network. In this process, the manifest and the hidden come into play. There were things that could never be part of the official program, but that were part of the event as a hidden informal possibility. For example, the legal grey zone of the NFC workshop. Although these hidden

possibilities were necessary for the event to be successful and fun for the more initiated crowd, they did not fit the public program.

MAKING AND HACKING

The next part explores how Sparvnästet and the museum represented two different genealogies of technological creativity: hacking and making. The division between these agencies is not always clear and interaction between them can be fluid, but, to make a point, this presentation will focus on the differences in order to try and pinpoint wherein the conflict lies for the museum as well as for Sparvnästet.

For the museum, hacknight seemed to be a project where they could continue their narrative of innovation and the maker. Sparvnästet, on the other hand, wanted to manifest the hacker community and had a political agenda relating to social change, creating a common pool of knowledge and network awareness, and continuing the narrative of a technical solidarity and the hacker-activist.

Hacker creativity explores unsettled and unknown grey zones, zones that are possibly unsafe and uncontrolled. It is not hard to understand that this can come into conflict with a fixed institutional policy. For this reason, the museum pinpointed the maker as their agenda because this provided a position to approach technical creativity without the possible hacker conflict. Making is an easier package and can establish a pedagogical institutional safe zone.

The museum's choice not to talk about hackers and hackerspace can be seen as a way to avoid not only the insecurity of hacking, but the ethical ideas of social change or the complex interactions of the socio-technological world, a discussion that makes some people or

groups feel uneasy. The maker provides a path of experiments without the political or ethical agenda of openness, thereby also offering a more productive, positive, and accessible agency while simultaneously lowering the threshold of participation, which must be seen as a distinct quality for the museum.

The choice of the maker is not only safer but also more market-liberal, since the experiments are mostly limited to personal freedom and not necessarily connected with the wider dream of social change. The maker agency is open for entrepreneurial possibilities, attracted by efficiency and convenience of open processes and communities rather than long term technical freedom. Innovation can be put into motion for capital and be a path of privatization, in line with the narrative of capital, innovators and start-ups.

While the maker attracts entrepreneurial thinking, the hacker-activist points to a discourse of an active citizenship and participatory democracy in a society that is becoming more and more digitized. In the maker agency, the social responsibility of technology seems to be a possible supplement, while in the agency of the hacker-activist, it is the essential pathway. From the Sparvnästet hacker-activist perspective, the maker agency becomes a reduction where the conflicts relating to technological power are put aside.

For Sparvnästet, hacking is an ethical imperative of free technology and an acknowledgment that technology should be liberated from enclosure and kept free. Barriers that prevent the community from collaboration stifle the goal of creating a more diverse and dynamic commons, while alienating users inside the enclosed systems. Free technology is a practical key for exploration and accessibility in order to further the autonomy of a community. Instead of

emphasizing individual experiments only, the self-organized hacker-activist agency strives for a multi-skilled collaboration approach, questioning the domination of centralized and institutional power by exploring decentralized and distributed forms of organization and protocols. From the hacker-activist point of view, society is caught up in a system of state-capitalism in which technologies sometimes serve to constrain democratic spaces. Here, hacker-activists can become nothing less than a new pedagogical avant-garde, which serves to defend openness and envision a radical form of skill based on participatory citizenship.

CONCLUSION

With hacknight, Sparvnästet opened up a typically closed community to the public space of the museum. This created the conflict of creating an acceptance for hacker culture while maintaining its radical nature. Negotiations around the common press release and otherwise separated information channels made the collaboration possible while the integrity of the two agencies was maintained.

The concrete nature of the event, with focus on experimentation and exploration, offered a common denominator and a temporary space for collaboration. Praxis provided the middle ground that is key to bridging different kinds of interest, skills and knowledge levels through exploration both in the workshop and at the workstation, probing, tinkering, making, and hacking. The practical event had a large range of activities and the visitors' level of skill and interest determined their perspective of it. Through this, several discourses and pedagogical approaches could co-exist side by side and encounters happen smoothly. The common ground forged between the museum and Sparvnästet was enough to

122 make hacknight a successful event. It also showed a mutual understanding for an area of technological creativity where borders are still unsettled.

Sparvnästet and the museum had long-term plans for making the hacknight an annual event; however, the common denominators were too few beyond the event to make it happen again. The museum has since had several different fairs and exhibitions in line with their maker agenda and, to my understanding, these have been a great success. Sparvnästet continues on with their more net-political agenda also with great outcomes. The question that still remains for both institutions, like the museum and self-organized groups like Sparvnästet, is how to form and organize without reducing the democratic and creative potential by exclusion.

NOTES

1. Erik Nilson, Stockholms fria tidning, 17 augusti 2012.
2. The National Museum of Science and Technology, blog post on the museum's web page, <http://www.tekniskamuseet.se/1/4096.html> (hämtad 17 augusti 2012)
3. Sparvnästet, Information from the hacknight event page, <http://www.make-all.se> (hämtad 17 augusti 2012)

Palle Torsson
palle.torsson@gmail.com

Linköpings universitet, ISAK
Kungsgatan 56
SE-601 74 Norrköping, Sweden