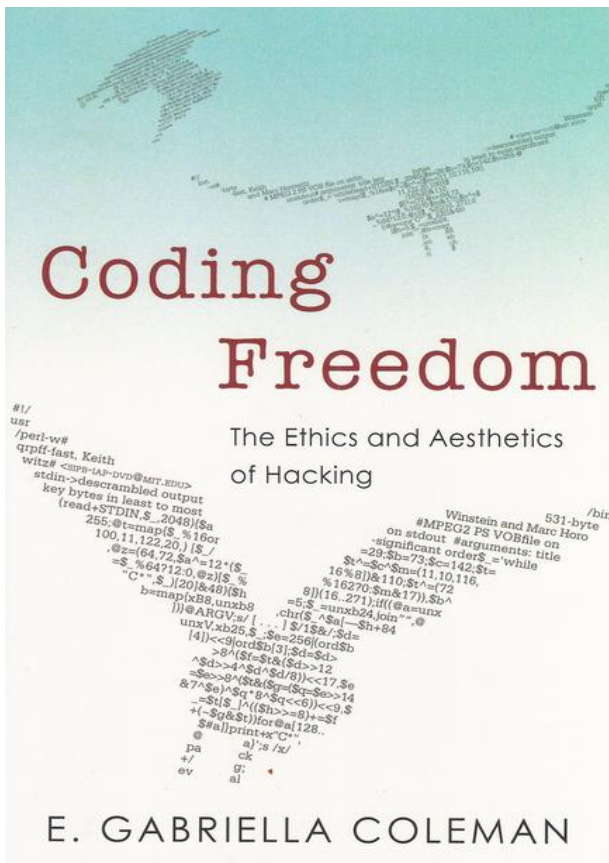


ICT4VCS: CODING FREEDOM

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking

Written by E. Gabriella Coleman | Published by Princeton University Press | 978 0 69114461 0

Review by John R. Hudson | www.bradlug.co.uk



Who are computer hackers? What is free software? And what does the emergence of a community dedicated to the production of free and open source software--and to hacking as a technical, aesthetic, and moral project--reveal about the fraught contemporary politics of intellectual law? Coding Freedom, an ethnographic account of free software development, examines how these hackers are at the forefront of fomenting a vibrant political culture of civil liberties online.

This book summarises the rise of free and open source software and its impact on notions of freedom. Arising out of an anthropological fashion – that anthropologists should study tribes in developed countries rather than those in developing countries – Coleman's study combines a deep understanding of hacker culture and how that led to the rise of free and open source software, the competing pressure from free marketers to place more and more restrictions on the ordinary citizen in pursuit of a supposedly 'free' market in media and a critique of a range of academic theories which have purported to explain the behaviour of individuals and groups.

For those working with voluntary and community groups, the analysis of Debian, one of the largest free software projects, will provide key insights into the management of a successful voluntary and volunteer based operation. But they will also find useful examples of how an essentially non-political grouping has been able to intervene so successfully in politics – bringing down seemingly unstoppable political initiatives at both national and international levels.

At a personal level, she teases out how an essentially individualistic activity, writing computer code, requires both the demonstration of superior 'craft' in order to lead to its acceptance and the ability to operate successfully within a group of peers who may give support, feedback and sometimes criticism but without whom an individual's code would have a limited future. She discusses in some depth the use of humour, both to illustrate 'craft' and to defuse tension.

I just thought when I got into it that the combination of the ethical and voluntary management issues in it would make it worth reviewing for the benefit of those with no interest in the IT side - and, of course, those with an interest in the IT side might also benefit from understanding the other issues.

For example, during the debate about the code which allows DVDs to be read by any computer, a programmer turned the disputed code into a poem which was presented to the court to support the argument that code should be treated as speech and should therefore be covered by 'freedom of speech' provisions.

At a historical level, she demonstrates that none of those involved in 'hacking' ever envisaged where it would lead; in the 1980s they just wanted to be able to hack in peace; in 1991 Linus Torvalds announced his project as 'just a hobby.' Only in 1998 did it become clear that this hobby might change the world. But even then, it was only in the narrow world of the personal computer that people thought it might bring some change. Today, free and open source software is in nearly all supercomputers including those running the Large Hadron Collider and IBM's Watson which won the *Jeopardy* quiz in the US; it is in virtually all digital TVs and most smartphones; car manufacturers are increasingly adopting free and open source software. Apple Computers all contain free and open source software and the software that drives the Internet was all developed as and remains free software.

But free and open source software has probably had its greatest impact in the area of intellectual property; ever since the 1980s there has been a concerted effort by publishers of all sorts of media to extend copyright so as to maximise their profits from copyrighted material. While hackers have had significant success in stemming some of the extensions sought by publishers, their greatest success has been in inventing alternative types of licence, in particular the GPL (GNU Public Licence) and Creative Commons.

Both turn traditional views of copyright upside down. The GPL first asserts the copyright of the author and then grants four rights to users – including the right to modify and distribute versions of the copyrighted material as

long as the original author it credited and the modified version is subject to the same licence. The Creative Commons suite of licences assert the copyright of the author but allow the author to decide whether the work can be modified or not or used in other commercial or non-commercial works. For example, a voluntary organisation can make clear in what ways campaign material can be reproduced by others in order to maximise the impact of a particular campaign message without losing their 'authorship' of the original.

Two key ideas in free and open source projects are meritocracy and consensus – the idea that those who take the lead in the project do so on merit, without regard to background, qualifications, etc. and the idea that decisions should be taken on the basis of consensus. So projects have to find ways in which newcomers can obtain 'merit' and ways of preventing those who have 'merit' from acting in arbitrary ways. They also have to find ways of canvassing the views of contributors and distilling from that a consensus about the way in which the project should move forward. Coleman's accounts and analyses of how these are handled within the Debian project will be valuable for anyone leading a volunteer project.

This book would never have been published in the UK; British publishers run a mile from inter-disciplinary texts. So British readers may be a little perplexed at a book which contains down to earth accounts of hacking, a historical account of the development of free and open source software, discussion of the legal aspects of intellectual property and analysis of hacker behaviour in relation to anthropology and utilitarian theory. It may be hard-going if any of these are not really your cup of tea; but it is well-written and the analyses really get to the heart of some deeply ethical questions about individual, group and political relationships in voluntary groups which are rarely considered in such detail.

Coding Freedom

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