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Junior Tutorial

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The Secrets of the Little Pamphlet:

Hippies, Hackers, and the *Youth International Party Line*

Abstract: Current discussions about hackers often portray them in a "great chain of being" of sorts, with all other hacker subcultures portrayed as perversions or corruptions of the original paragon of white-hat hacker. However, through examining the 13 year run of an underground newsletter devoted to phone phreaking started by Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies, I challenge this idea and, instead, assert that hacker culture has absorbed or been deeply impacted by the many technologically-curious subcultures it has come into contact with.

Stephen Levy's *Hackers* places the beginning of hacker culture in the tunnels of MIT during the 1950s and '60s, where nocturnal students constantly looking for the next system to conquer stumbled upon rooms that held the earliest computers. His hackers are subtitled the heroes of the computer revolution, a group of hyper-intellectual and almost machine-like social outcasts who were absolutely devoted to exploring the horizons of this new technology they began spending so much time around. Though they distrusted the hulking authority of large corporations and the government, they were disinterested in politics as long as they had free access to information and to the machines themselves: all else was a secondary concern.[1] MIT historian Bruce Sterling describes them as "independent-minded, but law-abiding."[2] This is the original image of the hacker: curious and motivated students who tinkered playfully and mostly innocently with their machines.

Fast-forward several decades to the modern day, and the image has changed almost beyond recognition. This is first and foremost due to the fact that the mostly homogeneous culture Levy describes has seemingly shattered into many factions with an array of philosophies, goals, and practices complex enough to comprise its own tabletop roleplaying game. Running the gamut from the malicious script kiddies[3] so well-loved by mainstream media to the free software hackers whose ideological crusade has made ripples in the legal world as well as the technical one, today's numerous hacker subgroups have little tying them together except a shared enthusiasm for technology. Whether or not these subgroups are interested in or willing to portray themselves as participants of politics, however, the act of hacking writ large has steadily become increasingly non-neutral. As society, popular culture, and the rest of the world slowly infiltrated their subterranean tunnels, the hackers lost the privilege of detachment and

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1   Levy, Stephen. 1984. *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution.* 41

2   Sterling, Bruce. 1992. *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier.* Part 2.
Accessed at: http://www.mit.edu/hacker/

3   A script kiddie is a derogatory term used to describe inexperienced malicious hackers who, usually influenced by the popular culture portrayals of hackers, use pre-existing programs to conduct attacks. They are not well-respected in the hacker community due to their lack of technical ability and innovation.

non-accountability. Like it or not, intentionally or not, today's hackers function within a system with its own political and legal issues even if they do not wish to engage in any politics of their own.

The subject of hackers and their politics has been broached from an impressive variety of angles, although the depth and ecology of scholarship in all of them leaves much to be desired—a natural condition for a young field that has been recently recognized as very important. A majority of existing research on hackers is done with an assumption of deviance: most recently, there has been a flood of rather sensationalist post-9/11 research on hackers in the context of "cyberterrorism."[4] In much less significant but growing numbers is a cluster of works on non-deviant web- and computer-based political activism. These often center around the heavily internet-based anti-globalization protests, especially the Zapatista movement's famous use of the internet to publicize their plight and the formation of Indymedia.org during the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, and attempt to create a social theory that will account for these new types of social networks and forms of protest.[5] However, self-identified hackers are rarely at the core of these accounts, which emphasize instead the activists who use technology but whose primary focus is still political change. An exception to this rule is the work of sociologist Tim Jordan and communications scholar Paul Taylor, whose several books and articles on hacktivism have kept hackers at the core of their research. Meanwhile, although not focused on the politics of the hackers per se, Bruce Sterling's *The Hacker Crackdown* provides an invaluable second opinion to Levy's *Hackers.*

Despite all of this, however, there is a significant gap in research about the politics of earlier hackers, which reflects a more general neglect of hacker history before 1990. Although plenty of primary source documents have survived from the era, not much academic analysis of

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4   See: Colarik, Andrew M. *Cyberterrorism and Computer Attacks.* 2006; Weimann, Gabriel. *Terror on the Internet: the new arena, the new challenges.* 2006.
5   See Annotated Bibliography for a complete list of sources

these have surfaced. This is unfortunate: besides being an interesting part of history, this era is also the one in which hacker culture evolves from the relatively simple one described by Levy to the complex smorgasbord of subcultures that exists today. The lack of research about this important episode of hacker history means that several important pieces of context about hackers in general and hacker politics in particular have remained overlooked.

One such backdrop is the relationship between the hackers and other subcultures of the '60s and '70s. Many sources—primary *and* secondary—implicitly or explicitly represent divisions within hacker culture as corruptions, perversions, or splinter cells of a pure lineage that runs from TX-0 hackers to Richard Stallman and beyond. Generally, then, the interactions of hackers with outside groups are portrayed as attempts to change or co-opt the hackers for impure purposes. In *Hackers*, for example, Levy provides the case of Community Memory, a project started in the early '70s that was a primitive sort of Craig's List for Berkeley's hippies and hackers alike, as a project where the ethics of hacking got spread (and naturally changed in the process, though not necessarily negatively) to a totally different culture.[6] This is, however, not the complete story. In contrast to the usual accounts, I present a close examination of the *Youth International Party Line*, an underground newspaper devoted to phone phreaking originally put out by the Yippies, as a case where the hackers manage to assimilate another culture into theirs. The view that the modern day hacker cultures are a dilution or a perversion of the original tradition is, while simple, incomplete: rather, we should think of the original hackers as only one of many groups and subcultures whose technology-mediated interactions contributed to the rich diversity of hackers today.

The Early Hackers: Geeks and Phreaks

The university context of early hacker communities was paramount in shaping their culture and character. Because they operated at a time when mainframe computers were still

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6   Levy, 175-179.

extremely rare[7], access to such machines was effectively limited to the researchers who rightfully had it and the students and university affiliates[8] who were able to sneak in. This exclusivity produced several direct consequences. First, it meant that the early hackers tended to be people with a certain degree of privilege—wealth, lots of formal education, and intelligence—simply as a product of the typical demographic makeup of college students. Furthermore, as affiliates of the university institution, they had access to protection and supervision over their activities: not only was there usually someone making sure that nothing went too wrong, but a university is often also less strict about the enforcement of certain rules, especially if the mischief in question is due to intellectual curiosity. The mischief was rarely truly malicious in intent, as anything damaging to the machine would only frustrate the hackers themselves: therefore, most hacks were instead of a productive and benevolent nature. Lastly, since everyone had to physically go to the same place to use the terminals, a natural community of like minds was formed. For these hackers, many of whom were social outcasts, it was an important support network that later, more dispersed groups would aspire to but never again establish with such ease.

For all of the reasons above, the more secretive and anti-establishment underground community for computer hacking, more commonly known as "black-hat hacking" in opposition to the institutional "white-hat hacking," was not really able to take off until at least the '80s when personal computers and networks began to be accessible to the public. Instead, what the '60s and 70s did see was the rise in popularity of phone hacking, also known as "phreaking." Although telephone technology and the networks that accompanied it had been around for almost a century, it had remained a primarily human-operated system until the 1950s, when AT&T decided to cut the human operator out of long-distance calling and implement an automated direct-dial instead. This simple step turned the telephone network into a

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7   Levy places his earliest stories at the end of the '50s: see Levy 17.
8   Levy tells the story of Peter Deutsch, the 12 year-old son of a MIT professor, who was accepted by the other TX-0 hackers due to his remarkable programming skills.

technological system, one that talented phreaks could learn the rules of and, eventually, manipulate for their own purposes.[9]

Despite similarities in methodology and philosophy and an eventual merger, phreaking and hacking came from drastically different places and immediately had several important cultural distinctions. Unlike the expensive and enormous computers, telephones were already affordable and accessible to most Americans by this time—even those without permanent addresses could find a public phone booth. This meant that the phreaks as a group were more geographically dispersed and demographically diverse than their hacker counterparts. Furthermore, while the hackers had no direct financial incentive for their activities, the phreaks did: there was no reason for people to join the hacker community besides a love for the technology, but for those with meager financial means, phreaking was often incredibly useful simply for obtaining free calls. Meanwhile, the combination of the lack of a physical gathering space and the social nature of the telephone immediately led to the popularity of telephone "conference rooms"—better known as party lines—where lonely and geographically-isolated phreaks could congregate and share their stories and ideas. Rather than hacking only to continually improve and serve the system, there was now an alternate purpose for which the system could be used. Playing with the system was now the means to an end instead of just the end itself.

The earliest phone phreaks were few in number, disorganized in method, and often isolated from one another. As mentioned above phreaking had a much lower barrier of access than hacking, which also meant that the phreaking community was more amorphous and ill-defined. Many people who may not have identified themselves as "phreaks" certainly dabbled extensively and perhaps even expertly with phone systems, but such tinkering outside the context of a community, a network of knowledge, or even a group identity does not contribute to

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9   Rosenbaum, Ron.   Secrets of the Little Blue Box   in *Esquire Magazine*, October 1971: p 116. Accessed
    electronically at http://myoldmac.net/FAQ/TheBlueBox-1.htm

the understanding of phreaking as a movement. Phreaking as a community and a practice, then, began haphazardly: errant discoveries, accidentally stumbled upon after hours of playing, were relayed through existing social connections: Joe "Joybubbles" Engressias, for example, imparted his cornerstone discovery of the 2600 Hz call-drop tone[10] to John "Captain Crunch" Draper not through a technical journal or at a conference, but simply because the two were already friends.[11] Even so, it is not until these phreaks figured out how to find and communicate with others like them that the practice could become a movement.

Two major events during the first decade of phone phreaking would shape its change from separate instances of experimentation into something more. First, in the mid-1960s, Bell made the mistake of publishing the company's frequencies for long-distance calling in a technical journal available to engineering libraries.[12] When college-attending phreaks found the information, they quickly realized that this information could be used to trick the phone system into thinking that a long-distance call was being authorized and began disseminating it amongst friends. This new understanding was a paradigm shift of sorts in the field of phone phreaking—with this foundational knowledge, phreaks could now launch more systematic investigations of the phone system, matching each countermeasure by the phone companies with one of their own and finding ever more elegant ways to circumvent Bell's security measures. The information in the article also became a symbol to define a community with: those who had found it and come to understand it now had something in common with each other, a springboard from which other conversations about phreaking could stem.

The second event was an attempt to more systematically distribute the fruits of the first

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10 At a very young age, the blind and perfect-pitched Engressias discovered that if he whistled 2600 hz into a telephone, the call would drop. This was because 2600 hz was the signal used to notify the operator side of the phone line when a conversation was over. By dropping the call on the operator side but still remaining on the line, Engressias and other phreaks were able to make free long-distance calls.

11 Rosenbaum

12 Rosenbaum

for political purposes. In 1971, Abbie Hoffman and "Al Bell"[13] started the *Youth International Party Line* with the intention of teaching other Yippies how to thwart Bell in a variety of ways with some political justification. In doing so, they created an influential and formative community and image for the phone phreaks that lived on far after their active participation in the phreak scene.

The Yippies:

In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture,* Fred Turner divides the youth reaction to the government and society's failings during the 1960s and 70s into two overlapping but quite different social movements. Springing out of the primordial soup of the civil rights struggles came the New Left, best symbolized by the Students for a Democratic Society and predominantly focused on waging battle against the failings of the government and of society through radical protests. Meanwhile, the hippies came to espouse a different response, referred to as the counterculture, which "turned inward, toward questions of consciousness and interpersonal intimacy, and toward small-scale tools such as LSD or rock music as ways to enhance both."[14] The latter is usually described as a coherent mass of drug-using, free-loving, cooperative-living long-haired hippies, but in reality it consisted of a number of extremely different subgroups whose only unifying theme was the rejection of some conventional, "square" value through identity politics (politics with a small "p"). This necessarily meant, however, that some groups were also politically active in the traditional sense (with a capital "P"): Turner, for example, highlights the New Communalists, hippies who left cities and formed utopian communes in droves, as a group that used "expanding consciousness and increasing interpersonal intimacy...not [as] an end in itself...[but as] a means by which to build alternative,

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13 Al Bell is a pseudonym for a figure that has been much neglected in both hacker and Yippie histories, perhaps because he has also never been publicly unmasked. Little is known about his life and character outside of what can be gleaned from *YIPL* and from a handful of secondary source accounts about it.

14 Turner, Fred. 2006. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. 31.

egalitarian communities."[15] Perhaps even more so than the New Communalists, the Yippies also stood at this intersection between politics and Politics.

Started in 1967, the Youth International Party was the brainchild of Abbie Hoffman and his friends. Its closest ideological ancestor is the Diggers, a radical group in San Francisco with whom Hoffman had previously been associated.[16] Themselves the self-proclaimed product of "the bohemian/underground art/theater scene, and the New Left/civil rights/peace movement,"[17] the Diggers are best known for the alternative economic system they constructed to help feed and house the flood of hippies who came to San Francisco following the Summer of Love; they established a network of free, community-run resources that gave supplies and food donated or stolen from a capitalist system they saw as corrupted to anyone who wanted it for free. The Diggers saw themselves as the leaders of the hippies, which they believed were a myth created by the media, and tried to educate them to manipulate the media instead.[18] Though they clearly belonged on the "counterculture" side of Turner's dichotomy, they were also opposed to the counterculture per se—they believed it was a media gimmick created to sell an ultimately false lifestyle.[19] They were absolutely devoted to the idea of "free"--free food, free stores, and a free society—and despised any commercialism.

Despite such hands-on responsibility, however, many of the founding members of the Diggers thought of themselves first and foremost as street actors. They saw these logistically-complex actions as performances, designed to make onlookers question their own assumptions in the theater of the street. This mentality is more clearly represented by their spectacular but strongly symbolic community happenings, such as the "Death of Money" parade or the famous hedonistic parties with the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin. The harmony of the two approaches

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15 Turner 32
16 All information on the Diggers taken from Martin, Bradford. *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts. 2004.
17 The Digger Archive online: Who are the Diggers? http://diggers.org/overview.htm
18 Raskin, Jonah. 1996. *For the Hell of It: The life and times of Abbie Hoffman.* pg. 100.
19 Raskin 128.

was exemplified by the Free Frame of Reference, a large golden frame that recipients of the Diggers' Free Food walked through to symbolize a new perspective on society. It was a way for community members to receive nutritional and political sustenance in one fell swoop. The Diggers were differed from the New Communalists in a simple but deeply meaningful way—rather than escaping society to construct their own, they chose instead to exploit its loopholes to create a separatist community right in the heart of the city. Somewhere between reform and escape, the Diggers fought to show the system its fallacies from within.

As the Diggers dissolved at the end of the '6os, it spawned a number of descendant groups. Of these, the Yippies were usually presented as the most logical heir to the ideology, but the differences between the two groups should not be discounted. Hoffman had, after all, only a Digger for about a year.[20] Although he was initially "absolutely starry-eyed"[21] at the Diggers' ideas and would continue to spread many of their precepts, such as the concept of "free," he had personal disagreements with the leaders and disapproved of their condemnation of the hippie and the counterculture as consumerist identities.[22] Instead, Hoffman wanted to create the myth of a revolt that was irresistible to the youth and terrifying to the system: a group that could feed upon and manipulate the consumerist tendencies and spectacles of society to spread their message.

Before Hoffman was a Digger, he was heavily involved with the New Left, specifically through his work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a radical group with very little bureaucratic hierarchy working towards racial equality in the South. As head of the SNCC chapter in Worcester, MA, Hoffman gained experience in distributing press releases and organizing bail funds, in publishing pamphlets and in protest. Although he would later mythologize much of his involvement with SNCC, the contributions he made in Worcester and

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20 Raskin 128.
21 Sloman, Larry. 1998.*Steal This Dream*. 73.
22 Raskin, 128.

the taste of political organizing and anti-organizing[23] he got were very real.[24] In fact, his identity

as "Abbie"--instead of Abbott—Hoffman emerged out of the ashes of the SNCC he knew. When

SNCC expelled all whites from the organization, Hoffman published a scathing editorial that was

aware of gender, honest and emotionally powerful, and written in the first person—a type of

writing that became known as his style.[25] It is his extensive experience with both sides of the

dichotomy is reflected in the complex nature of the Yippie philosophy.

To the methods and the ideas of both groups, the Yippies added an irreverent levity and a

willingness to play within the system that many hard-liners on both sides quickly disapproved

of. Emmett Grogan, a Digger founder so frustrated by the idea of property that he had given out

his name for free use by the entire Digger movement, was disgusted at Hoffman's appropriation

of Digger materials to produce a book which launched Hoffman into prominence along with the

Yippies through the commercial system he was opposed to.[26] Another Digger founder, Peter

Berg, claims that his last words to Hoffman were "I think I gave away a good tool to an idiot."[27]

Meanwhile, the New Left saw the Yippies as even more irresponsibly involved with

hippie culture than its predecessor: Turner's one mention of the Yippies depicts them as the

ones "tempting the leaders of the antiwar movements to abandon their organizing."[28] However,

this is not entirely fair: though the Yippies certainly indulged in the symbolic hedonism of the

hippies—heavy drug usage, free sex, and other forms of playful social deviance—they did so with

a mind towards actively applying these practices and philosophies to traditionally New Left

political struggles. Rather than organizing in traditional ways against these problems, the

Yippies protested the war by placing flowers in rifles and performing exorcisms at the Pentagon.

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23 SNCC was legendary for its lack of leadership, and this was a characteristic that Abbie would transmit to the
    Yippies. Raskin 71
24 Raskin 74
25 Raskin 76
26 Sloman pg. 120.
27 Sloman 169.
28 Turner 32

They leveraged their powerful understanding of mass media to generate some of the most effective imagery for the resistance: they were, as Hoffman put it, "an advertisement of revolution,"[29] designed to hack mass-media into spreading their message for them. Sharing the message of the New Left but employing the tactics of counterculture, they were a hybrid force not easily contained by either category.

The *Party Line* Begins

There is not very much in the way of creation mythology for the *Youth International Party Line*. The autobiography and biographies of Hoffman almost never mention it, and there is certainly nothing to explain how its two founders, Abbie Hoffman and Al Bell, met up in the first place. Almost everything we do know comes from the first issue itself, which was published in June, 1971 and distributed to the fifty people who had responded positively to Hoffman and Bell's flyering in Washington, D.C. on Mayday a month before. In the bell-shaped introductory address on the first page, Hoffman[30] explains that *YIPL* is an attempt to continue to create change in a way that education alone could not.[31] In other words, *YIPL* is conceived of as a manual for direct action towards the faults of "Ma Bell."

Over the course of its run, *YIPL* offers many justifications for cheating the Bell Telephone Company, to which it applies the rather bold label "Public Enemy No. 1."[32] These can be sorted into three categories based on the types of negative relationships between the technical system (the phone networks and industry) and the political (the U.S. government). The most fundamental one, which permeates the newsletter from beginning to end, is a sense of discomfort with the government's control over such an essential communications system; articles and letters to the editor speculate endlessly and, usually, fruitlessly over the possibilities

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29 Quoted in Brate, Adam. 2002. *Technomanifestos.* pg. 204.
30 Or so I infer from the rhetoric: this, like most articles in *YIPL,* is written anonymously.
31 *YIPL*: Issue 1, pg 1.
32 *YIPL*: Issue 1, pg 4.

of and protections against wiretapping and bugging by "Big Brother." This can be understood as

an argument against the mixing of political and technical systems and expands to include other

governmental decisions over the workings of the network: a hacker libertarian mindset that

Gabriella Coleman describes as "an aesthetic dislike for politics."[33]

The Vietnam War and the military-industrial complex it created provided another major

rallying point for political dissent. The primary target for criticism of this type was the war tax

levied on the telephone bill in 1966:

> In April of 1966, as the government was escalating the Vietnam war, Congress passed a
> law raising the Federal tax on telephone service to 10%. "It is clear," said Rep. Wilbur
> Mills... "that Vietnam and only the Vietnam operation makes this bill necessary."[34]

One of *YIPL*'s first actions was to organize a boycott of this tax, which they saw as directly

funding a war they did not support. This type of protest is the most nontechnical and directly

Political: in fact, in a later issue, there is a list of other, non-telephone-related corporations to

boycott.[35] In other words, its issue is with the cooptation of the technical system for the benefit

of the political.

Perhaps more at the heart of *YIPL* than either of these, however, was a hostility for Bell's

business model: as a government-regulated monopoly, Bell is able to legally lock out

competition without being a public utility. Bowing neither to the needs of the people nor the

dynamics of the market, Bell had an incredible amount of power that it leveraged liberally to

hold on to its throne and therefore had little incentive to innovate or provide quality service. As

Hoffman writes in response to a critique of the Yippie attack on the phone system:

> As the level of the technological development increases, the costs should decrease with
> the goal being to make everything produced in a society free to all the people... Until
> AT&T and the other corporations really become public services instead of power and
> profit gobblers, we will continue to screw them over every chance we get.[36]

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33 Coleman, Gabriella. 2004. The Political Agnosticism of Free and Open Source Software in *Anthropology Quarterly: 77(03)*. pg. 512.

34 *YIPL*: Issue 1, pg 4.

35 *YIPL:* Issue 11, pg 34.

36 *YIPL*: Issue 2, pg 6.

This critique provides the general justification for all actions taken against Bell, but especially endorses clever hacks that allow the phreak to attach third-party equipment to the network. It is an argument against the politics of the system itself, one that is most similar to sentiments amidst free software hackers.

With all of this politics in tow, it is easy to agree with the many secondary sources about *YIPL* that classify its original incarnation as a political newsletter rather than a technological one. Although this is technically correct, it is a misleading simplification of a complex situation. There is no doubt that *YIPL* started off with a highly politicized motive, but that does not detract from the highly technical content it hosted from the beginning. With introductions out of the way in the very first issue, for example, *YIPL* immediately proceeded to dole out information about the credit card number system and how to go about installing extra phones.[37] Within the first ten issues, *YIPL* dishes up explanations of blue boxes and red boxes, how to make free calls from payphones and how to receive free calls at home, all punctuated with diagrams and references to further resources. To claim that *YIPL* was a nontechnical publication reveals certain contemporary expectations about the format of hacker literature that postdate the publication itself.

The Medium is the Message

As previously mentioned, the first issues of *YIPL* were being published very early on in phreaking history, and there were few if any precedents to the problem of distributing newfound discoveries within the phreak community.[38] The institutional hacker communities also did not offer much in the way of solutions, as their geographic concentration meant that information

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37 *YIPL:* Issue 1, pg. 1-2.

38 It is interesting, though, that the term phreak or phreek is used without explanation in *YIPL* right off the bat. This implies that there is some public consciousness about the activity, but where this comes from and how it was organized remains unclear.

was usually shared face-to-face and communication via print was also rare. *YIPL*, then, is almost

certainly one of the very first print publications that attempted to disseminate underground

technical information across long distances.

On the other hand, underground newspapers had been around for as long as political

dissent has, and were enjoying a revival during the 50s and 60s with publications such as *The*

Berkeley Barb and *The New Age.* These publications were conceived of as alternative media: a

separate channel for disseminating information to a community or a movement without having

to go through the corrupted and censored mainstream media. They were characterized by their

do-it-yourself aesthetic, their political cartoons and generally sartorial tone, and their

community-driven nature. The content of many of these newsletters were already similar to

YIPL's in that they, too, were out to rip off the system. In fact, in the first issue of *YIPL*, when

Hoffman introduces the credit card codes that would basically allow the readers to commit

credit card fraud, he comments that "this code has already been published in many underground

papers, as you know."[39]

Today, the Free Software Foundation makes a distinction between "free as in beer"--

things that are monetarily free—and "free as in speech"--things (software, in this case) that are

free in a democratic sense for anyone to use. To the Yippies the two were still somewhat

conflated. They believed in free services and goods on the principle that it would lead to a less

restrictive and oppressive society or because they were engaging in civil disobedience but, as

Sterling puts it:

> This thin veil of decency was soon dropped entirely. Ripping-off the System found its
> own justification in deep alienation and a basic outlaw contempt for conventional
> bourgeois values. Ingenious, vaguely politicized varieties of rip-off, which might be
> described as "anarchy by convenience," became very popular in Yippie circles, and
> because rip-off was so useful, it was to survive the Yippie movement itself.[40]

The Yippies believed that since the corporations had stopped treating their customers like

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39 *YIPL* May 1971: 1, pg. 1.
40 Sterling. Part 2.

people, they could retaliate in basically any way and still be justified. Besides, they argued, they

were a very poor group that could not otherwise afford to make the long-distance phone calls,

and so Bell was not actually losing any business:

> ...As for phreaks ripping off the public, this is not too evident to us at TAP, who know
> that most phreaks enjoy exploring the system electronically, harmlessly, making a
> few calls that they would not ordinarily make....We provide AT&T with the excuse
> that we're partly at fault for rising rates.[41]

Debugging: Ironing out the Problems

Unlike the other newsletters, however, *YIPL* was dealing with a very specific topic matter

that required a carefully balanced symbiosis to stay functional. The Yippies were talented at

generating publicity and community-building, but most within the group lacked the technical

savvy and obsessive curiosity to constantly fuel the newsletter with interesting hacks. As such,

they needed to reach out to the phreaks who may have been less interested in their political

agenda but were instead interesting in finding a community of phreaks to tap into. Thus, while

the *YIPL* community was started with the explicit goal of educating as many people as possible

and inciting them to action against the phone company, it had to evolve to also accommodate

phreaks who were mostly interested in sharing information and networking with other phreaks.

This mutually-beneficial but somewhat schizophrenic symbiosis led to several of *YIPL*'s

apparent contradictions.

The core of these contradictions lurk within the issues of membership and exclusivity.

While the institutional hacker community was technically open to all, it was at its core a

meritocracy in the strictest sense and, for reasons already discussed, few unqualified people

would have found or wanted to join them anyway. The Yippies, however, were a much more

accessible organization, and one that actively recruited new members. As *YIPL*'s membership

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41 *YIPL*: Issue 28, March 1975. pg. 85.

began to climb, several important questions emerged: where and who does the information

come from, who was the intended audience, and what about everyone else?

Almost all of the underground newsletters at the time stayed afloat financially with the

help of donations and a pay-to-print classified section, which in turn became an essential

community water-cooler for the audiences of these newsletters. It was a forum where

community members could easily advertise their own goods, give tips to others about various

aspects of countercultural life, or—quite commonly—solicit relationships and sexual encounters.

By allowing the users to submit their own content, no matter how trivial, the newsletters played

an important part in not only transmitting news across the community, but also in actually

maintaining it. Despite the lack of a classified section, *YIPL* took the community-raising part of

its mission quite seriously. The editors made several attempts to set up a system whereby

phreaks could meet other phreaks in an anonymous fashion[42] and included a Letters to the

Editor section. *YIPL* aggressively requesting reader feedback, especially in the form of technical

information:

> The YIPL idea is limited if the research is left up to the staff. If our readers send in
> information that would be useful to other readers, and that means any information,
> related to food, entertainment, transportation, or anything, then we would pretty soon
> have a centralized information pool that would be incredibly well-stocked with useful
> hints.[43]

The readers complied. Each issue has a page reserved for letters to the editor, and many of these

were filled with an assortment of useful tips from members of the community. These were

mostly technical—"to defeat this infernal [wiretapping] device, you can use a S.P.S.T. switch to

turn off the speaker and mouthpiece yet allow calls to come through..."[44] but also occasionally

logistical—"I have located a supplier for No. 14 brass washers..."[45]—or completely unrelated

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42 *YIPL*: Issue 18, May 1973, pg. 55.
43 *YIPL*: Issue 6, November 1971, pg. 17.
44 *YIPL:* Issue 10, May 1972, pg. 30.
45 *YIPL:* Issue 10, May 1972, pg. 30.

—"Add 1/2 can of mackerel to 1/2 cup of Crunchy granola... ."[46]

Any reader of *YIPL* was allowed to submit these tips, and most of them had only a first name attached with no further identity established. Of course, the same applied to the rest of the publication: any feature or article could be user-submitted without being labeled as such, with changes in rhetoric and typesetting as the only evidence. This type of openness was reflected in other Yippie activities as well: at the first ever *YIPL* conference, for example, Bell employees were not only allowed in, but the Yippies actually circulated a petition for Bell to pay them overtime.[47] This totally nondiscriminatory mindset is a practice that would surface again in later hacker communities, this time as proof of the hackers' devotion to freedom of speech and thought.[48]

In the short term, however, it led to questions of legitimacy and authority, not to mention trust: what does Charles from Missouri know about telephones anyway? How do we know that the alternate schematic he submitted is more correct than the original? And, as *anyone* could read and therefore submit to *YIPL*, how do we even know that he is not an employee of AT&T seeking to sabotage and compromise our phone systems? Presumably, the editors reviewed the letters before publishing, but as this process was completely opaque and likely undermanned, the reader had no way of knowing whether what he was reading was true— or even safe.

The same problem as manifested in modern day hacker communities—or Wikipedia, for that matter—is alleviated with the expectation that the readers have a certain amount of expertise in the area and are therefore capable of discerning good information from bad, but this is problematic when applied to *YIPL*: if the purpose of the newsletter was the educate everyone, even those with no prior technical experience, how could the readers be expected to decipher

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46 *YIPL*: Issue 14, November 1972, pg. 43.
47 *TAP:* Issue 21, August-September 1973, pg. 64.
48 Coleman 510.

their own diagrams? This, actually was part of a larger problem: how could a publication be relevant enough to keep the attention of the expert phreaks needed to supply the information but still be relevant to those who had just stumbled across the idea?

This was a conversation that surfaced again and again in the archives of *YIPL*. The editors realized that "*YIPL* in the past has been too difficult to understand, and we're trying to understand....Basically we're trying to digest the hard stuff, and print in simpler terms for use by beginners up."[49] Mindful that the information was somewhat cumulative, *YIPL* made a valiant effort to make its back issues available at low cost to new subscribers despite the logistical nightmare this produced. Even so, however, it was difficult for beginners to decipher the complex diagrams and technical jargon. Despite the editors' best efforts to simplify, many descriptions of *YIPL* include phrases like "written in relentlessly technical language..."[50] and "pitilessly jargonized and technical."[51]

A struggle like this one is a very interesting one to have for a publication that would later be considered a "hacker zine." After all, the meritocratic nature of hacker communities meant that the ability to figure things out for one's self was extremely valued and respected. While political rhetoric is designed to be accessible to as many people as possible, part of the joy of hacking was the feeling of conquering an impressive amount of arcane knowledge. Because of this, the direct didactic approach of *YIPL* may have been a turn-off for hackers on the other side of the spectrum. *YIPL* was simply giving its readers fish, and the expert phreaks wanted data about ocean currents so they could teach themselves to fish.

Phreak Ethics: A Different Perspective

While all of this was going on, a separate and much more mainstream image of phreaks

49 YIPL: Issue 15, December to January, 1973. pg. 44.
50 Hafner, Katie. 1995. *Cyberpunk: Outlaws and Hackers on the Computer Frontier.*
51 Sterling, Bruce. Part 2.

had emerged. In October of 1971, only a few months after the first *YIPL* issue had been printed, an article called "Secrets of the Little Blue Box" appeared in *Esquire* magazine. The journalist, Ron Rosenbaum, had traveled the country to meet with the founding fathers of phone phreaking, and his depiction of these telephone wizards was touching, sad, and completely different from the one that *YIPL* presented.

The article is the first serious journalistic piece on phreaking, and it explains the process of getting free long-distance calls in great (although purposefully slightly inaccurate) detail. More memorably, however, it describes the friendly but extremely eccentric people within the phreak scene. The phreaks are astonishingly knowledgeable about the phone system—the procedures they perform are far too advanced to be printed in *YIPL*—and clearly have a devotion to it that can only be described as love. Quite a change, indeed, from *YIPL*'s antagonistic methods.

Indeed, this school of elite phreaks had been developing their own communities independently from *YIPL*, meeting exclusively over the phone, inducting only people whose activities had been reported to the papers. Phreak Al Gilbertson describes his first encounter with the phreak underground:

> That evening his phone began ringing. Phone phreaks from Seattle, from Florida, from New York, from San Jose, and from Los Angeles began calling him and telling him about the phone-phreak network. He'd get a call from a phone phreak who'd say nothing but, "Hang up and call this number."
>
> When he dialed the number he'd find himself tied into a conference of a dozen phone phreaks arranged through a quirky switching station in British Columbia. They identified themselves as phone phreaks, they demonstrated their homemade blue boxes which they called "M-Fers" (for "multi-frequency," among other things) for him, they talked shop about phone-phreak devices. They let him in on their secrets on the theory that if the phone company was after him he must be trustworthy. And, Gilbertson recalls, they stunned him with their technical sophistication.[52]

There is much less contempt in these phreaks' invocations of "Ma Bell"--they considered her a beautiful if flawed system that deserved to be explored and improved to the best of their

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52 Rosenbaum.

abilities. The pride they had in their machines and techniques indicated that here, phreaking

was not a tactic but an art, and the most skilled practitioners strove to perform elegant hacks in

the original sense of the word: clever and mischievous, but not malicious. And yet, as much as

they are masters over the phone system, they are just as dependent on it.

> But if they were shown a single button and told that by pushing it they could turn the
> entire circuitry of A.T.&T. into molten puddles, they probably wouldn't push it. The
> disgruntled-inventor phone phreak needs the phone system the way the lapsed Catholic
> needs the Church, the way Satan needs a God, the way The Midnight Skulker needed,
> more than anything else, response.

This reverence for the system contrasts with and impedes the Yippies' philosophy. When a critic

of Hoffman wrote that "to the American counter-culturist, a telephone in the hand is as much a

part of his uniform as denim, dried lentils, and a coiffure from Michelangelo's Moses" and

argued that taking down the phone system would be to the great detriment of Yippies,

Hoffman's attitude is that no system would be better than an unfair one. The Yippies are mostly

willing to sacrifice the phone system if it means equality elsewhere, but the phreaks have no

such choice. "If I can't phone trip and I can't phone phreak, I can't imagine what I'd do,"

explains Joe Engressia, the first phreak, to Rosenbaum. "I've been devoting three quarters of my

life to it."

This is not to say that the elite phreaks were completely satisfied with the status quo.

"As Cheshire [Catalyst, a later editor of *YIPL/TAP*] and his friends would explain to outsiders,

they loved the telephone network," wrote Hafner in *Cyberpunk*. "It was the bureaucracy behind

it they hated." Similarly, the phreaks in Rosenbaum's article express frustrations with the poor

maintenance of the system or its inefficient designs, but rather than attempting to reform this,

many phreaks simply tried to ignore it and do what is right for the technology. Near the end of

the article, Rosenbaum reports that Engressia was arrested a few weeks after their interview due

to a chain of events that began with a call he had made to an internal service group about a

defective line. Even so, the phreaks are reluctant to mount a resistance. As Cheshire Catalyst

explains in a much later interview:

> While lately we had to get into political issues because the politics are invading the technology. Ordinarily we don't really like to mess with politics, because that kind of adversarial relationship has nothing to do with the pure technical operation and the technical specification of what we like to play with: the hardware.[53]

In *Revolution for the Hell of It,* Hoffman states that "the key to organizing an alternative society is to organize people around what they can do and more importantly what they want to do... there is no ideology except that which each individual brings with him."[54] Ultimately, it is this openness that allows *YIPL* to transform in such a dramatic manner. Though the phreaks originally helped the Yippies with their cause, they began to realize that they could take over the *YIPL* movement for their own apolitical purposes. Slowly but surely, *YIPL* became more technical and less political, starting a self-reinforcing cycle that saw three name changes—Technological American Party, TAP, and Technological Assistance Program—ended with the publication in an almost unrecognizable state. Just five years after its birth, this is how far *YIPL* had come from its original purpose:

> "I hate to end my column on a sour note but a couple of TAP readers were pissed about the last few issues. They didn't like the light social criticisms or the plugs for books...They felt that TAP should stick to technical things and leave the social commentary alone....I don't know where these vegetables live but today technology depends on social, political, and ecconomic (sic) conditions and anybody who doesn't recognize this is a fool! ....So go ahead, stay in your room and play with your blue box and yourself" - tom edison[55]

Only three years ago, YIPL had been "the newsletter that advocates violence"[56]—now, its head editor had to justify the inclusion of social commentary. What happened?

By Any Other Name

The transformation appeared to happen overnight. There was no warning in the rhetoric

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53   Interview with Cheshire Catalyst   for the film NYC Hackers. Accessed at http://uit.no/breifilm/4276/20
54 Hoffman, Abbie. *Revolution for the Hell of it.* pg. 135.
55 *Technological Assistance Program.* May 1976: Issue 35. Found on pg. 106 of the Complete *YIPL* Archive
56 TAP: Issue 22, October 1973, pg. 67.

and no visible crisis slowly boiling to a bursting point, but in February 1974, after 3 years of influential if not financially successful circulation, *YIPL* changed its name a second time and, with it, declared a new attitude towards politics. More than any other, this moment marks the turning point in *YIPL*'s history—a sign that what had started out as a political publication had lost its roots. To better understand the circumstances behind this pivotal moment in the history of *YIPL*, it is illustrative to look at the two other instances in *YIPL*'s history when the name was changed.

The very first name change was relatively straightforward. Only a few months prior, in the wake of the 2nd annual international phone phreaks convention held in New York, the newsletter's name had been changed from the Youth International Party Line to the Technological American Party (TAP). The reasons behind this change, both explicit and implicit, were made clear. In prime real estate on the front page of the issue, the editors openly explained that "we changed our name because we want people to know where we really are and what we hope to become."[57] The *YIPL* name was insufficient for two major reasons: first, the editors believed that the name was too ambiguous to be easily found by people looking for phone phreaking information; second, the periodical was starting to expand its horizon beyond just the telephone and needed a name to reflect the wider scope.

The implicit third reason, not mentioned in the article explaining the name change, is nevertheless only a few inches away. A call for donations to the Abbie Hoffman defense fund, also on the front page, indicated that Hoffman had been busted for intent to sell cocaine. According to most biographical accounts, Hoffman skipped bail shortly afterwards and would be in hiding from the authorities for the next several years. The call for help on the front page of what was now TAP exudes sincere gratefulness to everything Hoffman had done for the newsletter as one of its co-founders, but he was now officially out of the picture. Al Bell was free

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57 *Technological American Party.* August and September 1973: 21. pg. 64

to do as he pleased, including disassociating the newsletter from its Yippie parent if he so chose.

Interestingly, secondary accounts of this first name change strongly suggest a hostile parting between Hoffman and Bell. According to Cheshire Catalyst, legendary hacker and last editor of TAP before it went defunct in 1984, the change happened because "Al Bell was wondering what all this 'political crap' was doing in his technical newsletter. He picked up his marbles, carried them up Broadway, and changed the name to TAP, Technical Assistance Program."[58] The description of the event in *Cyberpunk* similarly alludes to a dissatisfaction on Bell's part: "Al saw no place for politics in what was essentially a technical journal. In 1973, Al abandoned *YIPL* and Hoffman and moved uptown to set up shop as TAP, the Technological Assistance Program."[59] And again, in Bruce Sterling's *The Hacker Crackdown,* an influential history of hacker culture: "Al Bell more or less defected from the faltering ranks of Yippiedom, changing the newsletter's name to *TAP* or *Technical Assistance Program.*[60]"[61]

The seemingly unanimous consent among outside sources that Al Bell was hostile towards the politics of the Yippies is a strangely confident claim, especially given the paucity of evidence in the newsletter itself. Although Bell was editor of *YIPL*/TAP for over six years and undoubtedly contributed a large number of articles to the publication, most of them were unattributed and therefore difficult to trace back to him. It could be that his unusual straddling of subcultures resulted in omissions by both groups: in addition to being mentioned only briefly in all accounts of the Yippies, Al Bell is left off of most online lists of famous phreaks and hackers even as Abbie Hoffman is credited as the founder of *YIPL* despite the fact that Bell was clearly the more technically-minded of the two and worked with TAP for much longer. His legacy, then, remains almost entirely in the few articles of *YIPL*/TAP that he chose to attach his

58   The TAP Newsletter   in *Cheshire's Book.* Personal website of Richard Chesire AKA Cheshire Catalyst, 1996. Accessed April 04, 2008. (http://cheshirecatalyst.com/tap.html)
59 Hafner.
60 Note that both this quote and the one before it made a mistake   Al Bell changed the name to Technological American Party.   Technological Assistance Party   was the name given by Tom Edison in 1979.
61 Sterling, pt. 2.

name to. In an issue written in January of 1973, only a few months before the first name change,

Al Bell reveals how he first became interested in the politics of the phone company:

> "*YIPL* is the result of one phone phreak's realization that the military-industrial komplex is not just a term you learn in school, but a force that controls the planet Earth from the country America...One company has accumulated such an impressive shelf of pork that this company...represents the robber-barrons (sic) that dare to defecate on our world. This company is, in fact, the largest company in the world. Ma Bell is a mother of a fucker. ...Our purpose is mainly to make people think the question, 'Why are they ripping off the phone company?,' because once they do the answer will be obvious. *YIPL* members are actors in a play, and the world is watching. And we're having a lot of fun!"[62]

The political consciousness and anger in this is palpable, as is the Yippie-ish sense of revolution through shock and amusement. At least at this point, then, Al Bell was on board with Hoffman's politics and mission. After the name change, too, the newsletter continues to retain traces of its Yippie past: issue 22, for example, advertises itself as "the newsletter that advocates violence" and includes instructions on how to set payphones on fire—hardly signs of hacker ethics at work![63] The next issue continues the trend—the front page of this "special energy crisis issue" criticizes the American economy's overconsumption tendencies as the root of the newly publicized energy crisis and continues praising Hoffman's many contributions to *TAP*.[64]

It is precisely this apparent momentum that makes the announcement of the second name change so shocking. The actual name was, in fact, changed much less than in the first revision, but the gesture was far more drastic. Even while all parts of issue 25 looked and acted the same as its counterparts in issue 24, the announcement declared that the very essence of the publication had changed:

> "TAP is no longer Technological American Party. TAP is TAP. *We are not a political party. We do not advocate anything, as an organization.* All opinions are those of individual readers and staffpersons, and you may agree with them or not. There is, however, one policy of TAP: TAP will print technical information that is otherwise unavailable or unclear. Information which is illegal, and devoid of informational purpose doesn't make it, and an example might be a printed circuit

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62 *Youth International Party Line.* December 1972 and January 1973: 15. pg 44.
63 *Technological American Party.* October 1973: 22. pg. 67
64 *Technological American Party.* November 1973: 23. pg. 71-72.

board or a parts list."[65]

So what did this sudden change imply for the publication? Interestingly, there were no angry letters to the editor in the next issue and, in fact, no further justifications at all.[66] There were, however, two of *TAP*'s first large gaps in publication—six months between issues 26 and 27 and seven months between 28 and 29, both due to shortage of help and income. Although this was probably not a direct result of the name change, it could easily have been another symptom of its underlying cause. A changing of the guard on the *TAP* staff, for example, could account for both a potential shortage of help (if some staff members left without replacements, or if the replacements were less experienced) and a drastic shift in the editorial attitude. Meanwhile, the publication's more editorial and political columns disappear for several issues— after the "Ammo" column[67] in issue 25, in fact, there are no more political columns until issue 33 a full two years later: instead, the issues consist entirely of technical projects attacking a variety of utilities and "Letters to the Editor," most of which are also suggestions for ripping off the system.

TAP's return to political articles, incidentally, occurs only slightly before Al Bell's resignation from its staff. By this time, a new leader had shown up on the scene. "Tom Edison," who claimed he was "a technician and [doesn't] know [his] ass from a hole in the ground about running the business end of TAP," took over from Bell in August of 1977.[68] His portrayal of Bell depicts a figure changed from the one issuing confident statements about the mission of *YIPL* only six years before: according to Edison, Bell was now an unreliable and paranoid figure whose further involvement with TAP was a hindrance rather than a boon. As with most of Bell's life, how or why this mutation occurred is a mystery, but his departure from the magazine he

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65 *TAP*. January and February 1974: 25. pg. 76. Emphasis mine
66 Censorship seems unlikely given the general attitude of TAP. Many issues'   Letters to the Editors   section include disgruntled complaints from readers.
67 These run sporadically throughout TAP's life and are usually politically charged explanations of why certain practices should be condemned.
68 *TAP*. May and June 1979: 57. pg 182.

had birthed and raised signified drastic changes and, in many ways, the beginning of the end.

In 1979, Edison changed the name of the publication one last time, this time from the meaningless *TAP* to "Technological Assistance Program." The name no longer stood for the void of political involvement, but neither did it reconnect itself with any ideology with this change. The reasoning behind the change, except the idea of ushering a "new era of publishing," was left more unsaid this time than with the other two.[69] By this time, the publication had really come a long way from its roots. The "zine" style of handwritten words and miscellaneous clip-art photocopied together had been replaced by a much more legible, efficient, and in fact regulated series of type-written articles, which "had to be typewritten with a 5 inch type column width."[70] The same basic topics were being covered, but gone are the pretenses that the publication served anyone except a technical audience: the mackerel recipes were long gone now. Even the effort maintained for so long by *TAP* to catch new readers up on what they had missed through back issues and videos was now just a pleasantry—the new material was too technically sophisticated for all but the most dedicated neophytes, and what had once been an open community had progressed quite naturally into a priesthood of the arcane. By 1981, the whole newsletter is printed in one font, and the transition to a "real" magazine like *2600* was almost finished.

Disconnecting

When *TAP* finally ceased operation in 1984 and *2600: The Hacker Quarterly* rose out of its ashes, the Yippies and the phreaks officially parted ways. The decade that followed was one of relative quiet on the political hacking front, which echoed the overall calm of the '80s and early '90s in comparison to the turbulent '60s and '70s. During this time, the glory of hacker culture was greatly diminished by two separated forces. On one hand, the increasing co-optation of hackers by the security industry and, shortly after, the dot-com boom and bust led to an all-time

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69 *Technological Assistance Program.* September and October 1979: 59. pg 190.
70 Ibid

low in their status as a symbol of counterculture. On the other hand, as the personal computer revolution took hold, the elite hackers lost control of their "brand" as script kiddies caused mischief in the name of hacking and caused a bout of media hysterics. The hackers had become simultaneously more commercialized, more vulnerable, more infamous, and less arcane.

Quietly, however, a new movement was rising. Only a year after the death of *TAP*, Richard Stallman published the GNU manifesto and began the free software movement. By the early '90s, the complete operating system GNU/Linux had appeared and the "copyfight" was underway. The institutional hackers at MIT, the ones who had shied away from politics all along, had finally found a cause to rally for.

Today, within the free software and the related free culture movements, there are again many questions about credibility and anonymity, rip-offs and political legitimacy. In attempting to solve these problems, the hacker community would do well to remember its roots.