MAKERS, CRAFTERS, EDUCATORS

Working for Cultural Change

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PEDAGOGY OF THE HACK

El Rancho Electrónico and the Culture of Surveillance

León de la Rosa-Carrillo in conversation with Estrella Soria, Gato Viejo, Hacklib, and Jorge David García (AKA Sísifo Pedroza)

El Rancho Electrónico is a hacker space in Mexico City that welcomes "communities of hackers, hacktivists, open-source software users and people that simply feel like experimenting with technology" ("Invitación al Hackerspace"). My experience with it is limited: living 1,100 miles away I've visited only a handful of times, so when I requested their input for this chapter they were understandably skeptical. Nonetheless, they circulated my proposal through their email list looking for *rancheros* interested in chatting. I wanted to explore the pedagogy of hacking practices and the politics of privacy in the context of surveillance policies in Mexico, evidenced by recent reports of state-sponsored espionage.

Sísifo Pedroza first came to El Rancho hoping to explore the politics of creative processes and expand his practice as a music professor at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM] through the educational potentials of open-source software.

Whether free to acquire or not, open-source software is free to tinker with. While proprietary software, like Photoshop, locks its source code and holds users to strict consumer roles, the open-source alternative Gimp makes its code available to users that wish to develop the program's features.

At UNAM, Sísifo mentions that his classes might be the only opportunity students have to absorb open-source software since industry standards shape curricula with the

proprietary kind. He also translates this openness into a classroom where student matters are engaged collectively. "Privacy is not a private matter," he says resolutely.

Initially this seems contradictory; however, his point echoes one of eight didactic postcards that El Rancho produced in 2015 to prompt discussion regarding mass surveillance (Estrella S.).[1] The postcard, titled *¡Protejamos a Nuestrxs Compas!* explains that by encrypting our own online communications regardless of need, we make it tougher to pinpoint those whose privacy might be compromised, making privacy a collective issue.

On June 19, 2017 *The New York Times* reported that activists, journalists, and lawyers in Mexico were systematically targeted by Pegasus, a spyware sold exclusively to government agencies (Ahmed and Perlroth).

Shahani has detailed the role that spyware can play in domestic abuse by turning the victim's smartphone into a tracking device that records activities, locations, and online communications. For her part, Coleman speaks of a robust "private surveillance industry . . . boasting close ties to three-letter government agencies" (209).

On June 21, 2017 Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto confirmed his government's use of spyware to target enemies of the state but denied any involvement in the cases portrayed by *The Times* (Redacción Animal Político) and supported by independent reports (R3D). Peña Nieto also intimated widespread espionage: ". . . in any case I'm careful about what I say on the telephone" (quoted in Redacción Animal Político).

Estrella Soria says that clearly everyone's privacy is vulnerable while talking about cloud-based applications and all the personal information users supply in the name of convenience.

Soria is a member of both El Rancho and ADD FEM, a collective that promotes digital self-defense among women.[2] "Most participants request our workshops after incidents online . . . that mostly involve simple oversights like not locking their phone or unlocking it in the view of others."

Pegasus was first identified in 2016 when United Arab Emirates activist Ahmed Mansoor received suspicious text messages. Instead of clicking on the provided links he contacted researchers who found the spyware meant to infect his device. A few months later, Mansoor was charged with posting rumors and promoting hate online. As of this writing he remains imprisoned (Zavala).

The targeted attacks in Mexico followed a similar script. Victims received text messages that referenced their jobs, families, or safety and provided a link that if clicked would compromise their devices (Scott-Railton, et al.).

"Pegasus didn't necessarily change the way we work" says Hacklib, since protecting privacy and fostering anonymity are staples of hacker culture; however, by engaging socio-cultural contexts prompted by particular state policies, El Rancho, according to Hacklib, becomes a place of techno-political inquiry.

Some of these inquiries have resulted in an array of collectivities within El Rancho, incorporating different levels of open-source principles and hacking practices. They range from the already mentioned ADD FEM, concerned with

gender issues and self-care in digital environments; to Armstrong Liberado,[3] originating in Sísifo's incorporation of Rancho practices into his UNAM classes, that explores open-source approaches to music matters; and Campechana Mental,[4] where Hacklib participates and uses open-source technology to digitize and archive relevant texts.

But "software does not change practices," says Sísifo, referring to the limitations of an open-source governing principle. Likewise, open-source is the last thing Estrella mentions during workshops, focusing instead on discussing software in terms of control and how much or how little it offers the user.

Gato Viejo expressed a similar sentiment regarding user control in education, where learners routinely yield to the expertise that professors display through degrees. By assuming a cartoonish moniker, he distances himself from his state-given identity and all the credentials that come with it. During Rancho workshops, which can range from laptop care to legal self-defense, this nourishes a horizontal exchange of ideas and different types of knowledge that is based on trust as opposed to strict teacher-student roles. "It's not about anonymity" he adds, "[online] I can have all the *nicks* I'd like but the device will identify me."

"We are the new enemies of the state," said Juan E. Pardinas (quoted in Ahmed and Perlroth n.p.), director of a non-profit organization that promotes anti-corruption legislation in Mexico. His device was targeted by Pegasus, which supposedly only happens to devices employed by criminals.

As multiple calls for external experts to investigate the matter with transparency remain ignored (R3D), maybe the state itself can be identified as a device running proprietary source code and holding citizens to strict, vulnerable roles. If so, places like El Rancho become crucial to collectively engage surveillance cultures through open-source principles, hacking practices, and horizontality. This is what I call pedagogy of the hack and in a classroom setting it may prompt questions that address education as a device beyond any concern for digital technology:

- What does it mean to open-source education and allow its users to tinker with it?
- To what extent should the students' own inquiries inform and shape their educational experience?
- How can privacy matters be tackled collectively within institutions that routinely collect private information and link it with personal histories of achievements and failures?

Through questions like these, educators might be able to interrogate their own practices and recognize the nuances of an educational device that, much like smartphones, can very well render students—its users—vulnerable even as it professes empowerment.

Notes

1 Available at: ranchoelectronico.org/criptotarjetas/
2 ranchoelectronico.org/add-fem/
3 armstrongliberado.wordpress.com/
4 campechana.nomia.mx/

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