

The Rise of Nerd Politics

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The Rise of Nerd Politics

Digital Activism and Political Change

John Postill

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Hiding in Plain Sight

In May 2012, the Canadian sci-fi writer and digital rights activist Cory Doctorow wrote a piece in the *Guardian* titled ‘The problem with nerd politics’.¹ This came in the wake of successful campaigns against intellectual property legislation that technology ‘nerds’ saw as curtailing digital freedoms,² as well as fresh electoral gains by the nerdy Pirate Party in Germany. Doctorow entreated his fellow nerds not to seek tech solutions to political problems, but rather to ‘operate within the realm of traditional power and politics’ and defend the rights of ‘our technically unsophisticated friends and neighbours’ (ibid.).

It is unclear what effect, if any, this call to arms had across the world of nerd politics. What we can say with certainty is that this social universe has continued to expand in the intervening years since Doctorow’s article. This expansion includes the space of formal politics, which the Pirate parties and other nerd formations have managed to penetrate in recent times. The rise of nerd politics has, in fact, been a global trend hiding in plain sight for many years now, a trend crying out for an explanation. Since the late 2000s, the international media have covered many instances of it, including Anonymous’s war on Scientology, Iran’s Green movement, WikiLeaks’ Cablegate leaks, the Arab Spring, Spain’s *indignados*, the Occupy movement, Edward Snowden’s revelations about the US National Security Agency (NSA) and Russian and British meddling with the 2016 Trump campaign, most recently in connection to the UK firm Cambridge Analytica.³ But so far we have lacked a common narrative to bind together these seemingly disparate events. Uniting all of them, I suggest, is the pivotal role played by a new class of political actors I call ‘techno-political nerds’ – or simply ‘techpol nerds’. By this I refer to people who operate at the intersection of technology and politics, and who care deeply about the fate of democracy in the digital age. They will be our guides to the expanding world of nerd politics and its global ramifications.

For the last eight years I have investigated this dynamic social world. One of my first encounters with it was in October 2010, during anthropological fieldwork in Barcelona, Spain. It was then that I attended the Free Culture Forum, a global gathering of hackers, geeks, lawyers, bloggers and others interested in issues of internet freedom and ‘peer-to-peer’ forms of cultural production. During a break I struck up a conversation with a young hacker and information activist from Iceland. We talked about how differently anthropologists and hackers understand political systems (see Kelty 2008: 263). I explained that many anthropologists today are averse to notions such as ‘structure’ or ‘system’ and prefer to think of human life in terms of ‘social practices’ (Postill 2010). For my interlocutor, by contrast, the notion of system remains key. Political systems, he said, are no different from any other system in that they can be collaboratively studied, modified and improved – in other words, they can be hacked (Brooke 2011).

A few weeks after this conversation, in November 2010, the whistle-blowing site WikiLeaks began the release of over 250,000 US diplomatic cables in partnership with leading international newspapers such as the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *El País*. Suddenly, my chosen research focus on digital freedom activism – until then a rather obscure choice in need of justification – had taken centre stage globally. The worldwide impact of the leaks was huge at the time, and Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and Anonymous were now household names. When the US government pressurised MasterCard, Visa and PayPal into blocking donations towards the legal fees of Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, the online network Anonymous mobilised large numbers of internet users who attacked and disabled their servers (Coleman & Ralph 2011). Soon after that, both WikiLeaks and Anonymous became embroiled in the fledgling Arab uprisings and in the wave of protests that swept through Spain, Greece, Mexico, the United States, Britain and many other countries throughout 2011.

To try and make sense of these events, I searched online and found a Swedish TV documentary on WikiLeaks.⁴ To my surprise, the Icelandic hacker I met in Barcelona was one of the talking heads in the film. His name is Smári McCarthy. He recounted the ‘information famine’ that had befallen Iceland after the implosion of its banking system in 2008. The then little-known WikiLeaks had obtained documentation that laid bare the tight grip of cronyism on the country’s financial system. When the bankers realised that this documentation had been posted online,

they forced the Icelandic judiciary to impose a gagging order on the news media for the first time in the country's history. Undeterred, a state TV news anchorman named Bogi Ágústsson circumvented this order by simply directing viewers to the WikiLeaks website. This incident not only made WikiLeaks an instant phenomenon in Iceland but, following a high-profile visit by Assange and months of lobbying by McCarthy and other Icelandic information activists, also led to the unanimous passing of legislation aimed at transforming Iceland into 'a new haven for free speech' (Brooke 2011: 122; see also Chapter 2).

But who exactly are these techpol nerds, and what do they want? Far from the Western stereotype of geeks and nerds as young, white, socially awkward males, these political actors come in many different shapes, sizes and colours. While some are indeed computer experts – Julian Assange and Edward Snowden spring to mind – many wouldn't be able to write a line of code or hack a computer to save their lives. Their interest in technology is mediated by other forms of expertise, such as law, art, media, politics or even anthropology. Nor are they all uniformly libertarians, as they are often made out to be, especially in the United States, as Coleman (2017) has noted. In fact, ideologically they range from anarchists and libertarians on the anti-state side of the fence to liberals and radicals on the pro-state side. But practically all of them support some form of democracy and abhor authoritarianism. In addition, most are 'rooted cosmopolitans' (Tarrow 2005: 29) more actively involved in the politics of their own countries of birth or residence – sometimes remotely, via the internet – than in those of third countries. Their modus operandi is often a blend of teamwork and crowdwork (e.g. through crowdfunding and crowdsourcing), including strategic 'part-nerdships' with other political actors. Rather than being 'techno-utopians' (*pace* Morozov 2013), they are actually pragmatic utopians who are painfully aware of the everyday limitations and frustrations of technology. Most steer clear of quixotic schemes and prefer to attain 'concrete changes' (Kubitschko 2015a; see also Levi 2012) through collaborative actions in which technology is invariably only part of the answer.

At this point, an important caveat about the scope of this book is required.⁵ In the present study I focus on pro-democracy nerds, the sort of people one finds at public gatherings on digital liberties, for instance, the previously mentioned Free Culture Forum, or at events such as RightsCon, NetMundial or the Forum Demokrasi Digital (Chapter 4). Consequently, I will have little to say about secretive nerds working on behalf of author-

itarian regimes such as Russia, China or Iran – or indeed, about nerds quietly furthering the ambitions of large digital corporations like Google, Facebook or Microsoft, those involved in organised cybercrime and so on (see Deibert 2013; Tsui 2015).

The dynamic world of nerd politics has been in the making since the 1980s, but it is currently undergoing a remarkable growth spurt triggered by a series of ‘critical events’ (Sewell 2005), such as Cablegate, the Arab Spring, the *indignados* and Snowden’s NSA revelations. This acceleration is linked to the post-2008 global crisis of liberal democracy, fuelled by the political passions of nerds, and enabled by the proliferation of digital media. The rise of nerd politics matters to us all because activist nerds are at the very heart of some of the key political, economic and cultural battles of our times. These include struggles over the meaning and practice of democracy, over freedom of expression, intellectual property and the creative industries, and the right to privacy in an age of ‘datafication’ among other issues.

Four Corners of a World

In this book I argue that techpol nerds operate in a highly dynamic ‘social world’ (Strauss 1978) that intersects multiple other social worlds, including politics, culture and business. This is a world subdivided into four main subworlds (or spaces): data activism, digital rights, social protest and formal politics. To gain a first appreciation of these four corners of the nerd politics world, let us briefly consider the case of a Barcelona-based group of activists named Xnet. This group is unusual for its high degree of nerd politics nomadism, but it is precisely this characteristic that will help us gain a quick overview of this complex social world.

I first met the unofficial leader of Xnet, the artist and activist Simona Levi, along with her team, in the summer of 2010, during the anthropological fieldwork in Barcelona just mentioned. Indeed, the Free Culture Forum event mentioned above was organised by them. The group was then a few years old and had been active exclusively within the digital rights space – a space of political action in which nerds fight for online freedom of expression and other digital freedoms, where they abide by the maxim that ‘digital rights are human rights’ (see Chapter 4). At the time, Xnet were fighting an ‘anti-piracy’ bill that they saw as criminalising the everyday online practices of millions of Spaniards. The bill was known

as *Ley Sinde* (Sinde's Law) after its main champion, the then minister of culture, Ángeles González Sinde.

In November 2010, nerd suspicions that the US government, and not its Spanish counterpart, had drafted the new bill at the behest of US culture industry lobbies were confirmed by US diplomatic cables releases by WikiLeaks. In December 2010, as the bill was set to be passed by the Spanish Parliament, Xnet and fellow nerds from across Spain successfully mobilised against it. Their most effective action was arguably a voluntary blackout by Spain's prime streaming and downloading websites, which accounted for more than 70 per cent of the country's internet traffic. Visitors were greeted with the lines: 'If *Ley Sinde* is passed this page will disappear. The internet will be one more TV in the service of power'. At a stroke, millions of Spaniards were denied their favourite weekend entertainment. As a result, a mass audience instantly morphed into an outraged public. The following day, there were cyberattacks against the e-mail addresses and websites of the main political parties and Parliament, as well as physical protests outside the parliament building in Madrid. Finding themselves under pressure, some political parties backed out and the bill was initially defeated (see Chapter 4).

Alas, Spain's digital rights nerds had little time to bask in their glory. Just six weeks later, their elected representatives ignored the popular revolt and signed the bill into law. Xnet responded to this perceived betrayal by migrating to the social protest space. They did this by supporting and joining the fledgling protest platform ¡Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now!), which called for mass marches on 15 May 2011 to demand 'real democracy'. To this end, they transformed their own workspace, a venue known as Conservas, into the unofficial DRY headquarters in Barcelona. This switch from digital politics to politics writ large amounted to a Turnerian 'schism' (Turner 1974: 42) between Spain's nerds and its now discredited political class. The marches were well attended and led directly to the unplanned occupation of dozens of squares across the country, which in turn led to the 15M movement (see Chapter 5). The social protest space, at least as it has evolved since the Arab Spring, is based on the occupation of public space and seeks to rediscover the true meaning of democracy through popular assemblies. While the digital rights space tacitly subscribes to the ideal of a liberal, representative democracy, the social protest space openly embraces assembly democracy.

Exactly a year later, in May 2012, in front of a large crowd gathered in Barcelona's Plaça de Catalunya to mark the first anniversary of the

15M movement, Simona Levi announced a new crowdfunded campaign named 15MpaRato. Their five-year goal was to bring to justice Rodrigo Rato and other senior bankers responsible for the collapse of Bankia, one of Spain's leading financial institutions. Bankia was bailed out at enormous cost to taxpayers in the wake of the post-2008 property market collapse. Xnet urged prospective whistle-blowers to leak data on Bankia to a secure website they had set up for this purpose. In other words, Xnet were now moving into the data activism space (see Chapter 3). The maxim animating this space is that ordinary people should empower themselves by using digital data to hold the powerful accountable for their actions – what Keane would call a 'monitory democracy' ideal (Keane 2009: 676 et passim).

In early 2013, Xnet migrated once again to another corner of the nerd politics world. This time they relocated to the formal politics space, where they registered a new political party called Partido X to campaign in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament. Inspired by hacker principles and practices, Partido X displayed both similarities with and differences from existing Pirate parties across Europe (Chapter 6). Levi argued at the time that the 15M movement was entering a new phase in its evolution; now that the ruling elites felt 'surrounded' by civil society, the *indignados* were finally in a position to 'take the institutions'.⁶ In doing so, Partido X was breaking the 15M taboo of not engaging in representative politics, paving the way for other grassroots formations such as Podemos and Barcelona en Comú. To manage this dissonance, they rejected the telegenic 'personality politics' of mainstream campaigns in favour of candidates chosen for their integrity and expertise, and called themselves a 'citizen network' (*red ciudadana*) (Chapter 6).

When Partido X failed to secure any seats in the European Parliament, the group went through a period of soul-searching that eventually led them back to the data activism space in 2016. There they wrote and directed the 'data theatre' play *Hazte banquero* ('Become a banker'), based on their 15MpaRato leaks, which earned them critical and popular acclaim (see Chapter 3). Through this play, the Xnet activists wanted to tell two stories simultaneously: the story of the 'culture of impunity' enjoyed by Spain's ruling elites, and the story of how it is only 'organised citizens' who can put a stop to it. Its co-author, the activist Sergio Salgado, described the play to me as 'pure data' (*datos puros*). He also told me that audiences felt 'empowered' on leaving the show, and that they congratulated the activists more for the play than for the leaks that made it possible.

Finally, in late 2017, Xnet re-entered the social protest space when the group became involved in Catalonia's independence referendum. This entailed, among other things, denouncing moves by the Spanish state to censor the internet and taking to task a major unionist newspaper from Madrid, *El País*, for unfairly accusing the regional government of violating the data privacy of its own citizens (see Chapter 5). It remains to be seen where the group will operate in the coming years, but to judge by their trajectory to date it is unlikely that they will restrict themselves to their original corner of the nerd politics world, that of the digital rights space.

Xnet holds a special place in my eight-year struggle to understand the rise of nerd politics, for it was precisely their unusually nomadic trajectory that revealed to me the invisible external and internal boundaries of the nerd politics world. These boundaries may be both porous and imperceptible to the human eye, but they are as empirically real as a herd of elephants or a parliamentary building. Xnet provided me with a map of Spain's techno-political terrain that I then applied to case studies from Indonesia, Brazil, Iceland, Tunisia, Taiwan and the United States – as well as globally. The map was a breakthrough: the same four-cornered, dynamic geometry found in Spain helped to explain the limits and possibilities of nerd politics elsewhere, including on a global scale.

But before I can support this bold claim, and how it will unfold in subsequent chapters, I must first review our existing knowledge of nerd politics. As it turns out, we know far more about this thriving social world than we may think, yet this knowledge is strewn across numerous literatures and hampered by the lack of a common conceptual language and frame of reference.

Geeks, Hackers et al.

Although there is to date no scholarly literature on nerd politics as such, three overlapping literatures have advanced our current knowledge of this emergent phenomenon, namely digital politics, hacker politics and techno-politics. While digital politics has a much broader scope than nerd politics, hacker politics is more narrowly focused on a single category of nerd (that is, hackers). For its part, techno-politics has the same scope as nerd politics, yet without the explicit human element (nerds) that occupies us in the present study. Let us briefly review each literature in turn.

The growing use of digital media by political actors of all kinds – politicians, journalists, activists, celebrities, religious leaders and so on – has

spawned a burgeoning literature, albeit one that is highly diverse and split along disciplinary and topical lines. The term ‘digital politics’ only began to acquire academic currency in the early 2010s (Postill 2012). This signalled a rapidly growing scholarly interest in both the digitisation of traditional politics and in the politicisation of the digital realm. Adapting an earlier scheme by Chadwick (2006), we can speak of four main sub-areas of study: digital government (executives and bureaucracies), digital democracy (community, deliberation, participation), digital campaigning (parties, candidates, elections) and digital mobilisation (interest groups and social movements) (Postill 2012). A forerunner to this umbrella term was ‘internet politics’, with a number of textbooks under this rubric appearing in the mid 2000s with the phrase in their titles (e.g. Chadwick 2006; Chadwick & Howard 2008; Oates et al. 2006). A good example of the recent terminological shift is the collection on digital politics by Coleman and Freelon (2015), which features, among others, sections on theories of digital politics, collective action and civic engagement, and government and policy.

Of special relevance to the study of nerd politics is the work of the British political communication scholar Andrew Chadwick. His concept of ‘the hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013, 2017) has been particularly influential. This is the simple but powerful idea that our current media environments are a combination of old and new media technologies, practices and actors interacting in complex, non-teleological ways. Chadwick argues that the political sphere is increasingly dominated by those individuals, groups, and organisations best able to ‘strategically blend older and newer media logics’ (Chadwick 2013: 204). The encounter between these contrasting media logics, he suggests, can sometimes cause confusion and disorder, yet it also creates ‘new patterns of integration’ (ibid.: 209). For instance, techpol nerds (my term, not Chadwick’s) such as Assange and Snowden chose to partner with the *Guardian* and other established media in order to amplify their whistle-blowing campaigns, thus producing a mutually beneficial outcome (Chadwick & Collister 2014; see also Di Salvo 2017). In turn, such collaborations had a profound effect on the international media landscape (Karatzogianni 2015), with some scholars positing the emergence of a ‘networked fourth estate’ (e.g. Benkler 2011: 311).

Along with Chadwick, other communication scholars have also investigated the various forms of expertise that go into the practical repertoires of digital politics agents. For instance, Kubitschko (2015a) describes how

Germany's Chaos Computer Club (CCC), a hacker organisation founded in 1981 (see Chapter 3), proved that computerised voting was unsafe. In doing so, they not only politicised a technological issue but also attained a 'concrete change in democratic procedure' (ibid.: 399), that is, the scrapping of e-voting. CCC activists used a rich media repertoire to engage with diverse publics through 'ongoing communicative action' (ibid.: 397). Over time, they developed a set of 'interlocking arrangements' with politicians, journalists, judges and other digital stakeholders through 'multilayered media practices' resulting in a virtuous cycle of cooperation (ibid.: 399). For his part, Hussain analyses the role of policy entrepreneurs in the promotion of internet freedom. These 'political technologists' played key roles in the 2011 protest movements in the Arab world and elsewhere, creating 'new norms about digital infrastructures' (Hussain 2014: 102; see also O'Maley 2015, 2016). Similarly, I have written elsewhere about the involvement of 'freedom technologists' – a term I later replaced with 'techpol nerds' – in the new protest movements, with Iceland, Tunisia, and Spain as the case studies (Postill 2014a).⁷

Turning now to the second emerging literature – hacker politics – here the two more influential authors are the American anthropologists Chris Kelty and Gabriella Coleman. In his ethnohistorical study of the free-software movement, Kelty contends that geeks and hackers 'argue about technology but also argue with and through it' (Kelty 2008: 5). These political actors continually modify and maintain their social world by 'figuring out', both discursively and technically, how to proceed with their projects. Kelty calls the emergent, dynamic socio-technical sphere in which hackers operate a 'recursive public' (ibid.: 7). Blending social and operating systems into their politics, free-software nerds regard the internet not as something fixed but rather as a flexible 'standardised infrastructure' (ibid.: 34) that sustains their social identity. There is not a story of hacker genius but rather of the 'active modulation' (ibid.: 181) – that is, translation – of practices linking human and non-human agents.⁸

Unlike Kelty, Coleman distinguishes – at least in some of her work – between geeks and hackers (Coleman 2011: 512). While computer geeks are 'literate in digital media', they are not as 'technically skilled', she notes, as hackers. The latter often self-identify as hackers, subscribe to 'some version of information freedom' and can be found at events such as the annual Chaos Communication Congress (ibid.: 512–513). In occupational terms, hackers are often hardware makers, programmers, security researchers and system administrators. Geeks and hackers may be different in some regards, but they do share a 'closeness to the machine'

and a staunch anti-authoritarianism (ibid.: 512–513). Moreover, both see a crucial difference between ‘free speech’ and ‘free beer’: to them, freedom refers to ‘personal control and autonomous production’ (Coleman 2013: 36). Repurposing Scott’s famous ‘weapons of the weak’ concept (Scott 1985), Coleman coins the term ‘weapons of the geek’ to refer to ‘a shared set of cultural practices, sensibilities, and even political tactics’ conducted by geeks and hackers (Coleman 2017: 100). These constitute ‘a class of privileged and visible actors’ who, unlike Scott’s Malay peasants, ‘often lie at the center of economic life’ (ibid.: 100). The political lives of geeks and hackers, she concludes, result from ‘the concrete experiences of their craft’ (ibid.: 100).

Coleman (ibid.) argues that hacker politics has intensified since 2010, and seeks to provide an ‘inventory’ of this process. Drawing on Sewell’s theory of historical change (Sewell 2005; see also Chapter 7), she suggests that ‘a handful of [critical] events’ have driven this intensification, ‘beginning with WikiLeaks, followed by a burst of multiyear activity from Anonymous, and being capped off, finally, with Snowden’s megaleak’ (ibid.: 100). She also notes the ideological and geographical diversity of this strand of political action. This diversity is a result, in part, of the ambiguity of liberalism as a political ideal, and also of the fact that hackers ‘labor on different objects, initiate different types of projects, and are located in many different parts of the world’ (Coleman 2011: 514).

Recently, Coleman and Kelty pooled their expertise to co-edit an issue of the journal *Limn* on the proliferation of ‘hacks, leaks, and breaches’ across the contemporary political landscape (Coleman & Kelty 2017). In their editorial, they ask whether hackers and hacking ‘have crossed a techno-political threshold’ and to what extent, if at all, these practices and actions are ‘transforming our world, creating new collectives, and changing our understanding of security and politics’ (ibid.). The rise of hacktivism exemplified by Anonymous, they contend, signals as much a cultural and political change as it does a technological one. At the same time, though, the ‘complex tools, techniques and infrastructure[s]’ of hackers have not fundamentally changed (ibid.).

The third and final literature, techno-politics, is best represented today by its Spanish name, *tecnopolítica*, for nowhere has this strand of scholarship and activism taken firmer roots than in Spain and Latin America. At the turn of the millennium, Douglas Kellner defined techno-politics as ‘the use of new technologies such as computers and the Internet to advance political goals’ (Kellner 2001: 182). More recently, in the