

## Book Reviews

# *Hacking Diversity: The Politics of Inclusion in Open Technology Cultures*

By **Christina Dunbar-Hester**,

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■ **“HACKING DIVERSITY:** *The Politics of Inclusion in Open Technology Cultures*” is a study of the efforts of open technology communities to “hack” the issues around the lack of diversity that pervades not only their volunteer communities, but also their related disciplines at large. Open technology communities are loosely organized, volunteer, online groups, focused on development and distribution of open or free software and hardware. Examples include The Document Foundation (home of LibreOffice), Drupal Association, Linux Foundation, and Mozilla Foundation. The author of this book is Christina Dunbar-Hester, a sociologist by training, who peers into this world not only as a female, but also as a nontech professional and thus is an outsider in this field. Her conclusion is that the hacking approaches that these communities have tried to adapt, in an effort to address the problems around diversity, are not really effective. Why? Because diversity issues stem from cultural issues. The underlying unequal distribution of social power that accompanies those allowed to “play” in these open technology spaces cannot be fixed by adding more individuals from diverse groups. The lack of diversity is a consequence of the unequal cultural distribution of social power. Focusing on representation—making these open technology

spaces more diverse—is not a mechanism that can be used to fix these pervasive and entrenched cultural issues. It is the root problems themselves that need to be hacked, not the lack of representation.

So what does Dunbar-Hester study to reach this conclusion? She starts by reviewing the history of both hacking and women in computing. Hacking has its roots in the 1950s. Led by young, adventurous, white, middle-class males with a reputation for thinking of themselves as mentally superior, these early hackers derived both social power and status from their activities (which were generally viewed as mischievous, but not harmful). Of course, hacking has evolved in the decades since then, taking on sometimes political overtones for hacking activism, or “hacktivism,” as it is called, as well as negative overtones from criminal efforts by hackers around the world. Diversity efforts in hacking spaces also has a history, most notably advanced by FLOSS (Free/Libre/Open-Source Software) communities, although their efforts on gender and diversity issues in technology lagged industry efforts by about a decade.

With this background, the author notes that most of these hacked diversity efforts have taken one of the two paths: creating separate open technology spaces devoted to (largely feminist) hacking efforts versus attempting to achieve change from within existing technology communities. Since diversity efforts seek to focus on reforming the social rules around how technical communities organize and

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operate, the practice of codeveloping social rules and norms can be viewed as an extension of the process used to create codeveloped, free software. Through this lens, the hacking approach to diversity in open technology communities makes sense. However, hackers tend to wear their badges of non-conforming antiauthoritarian behavior with pride. Their words and actions are often at odds with goals of establishing social norms around civility and caring. How? The tenacious devotion to free speech and free expression in open source communities frequently fuels uncivil and sexist speech protected by a “veil of anonymity and freedom.” The cultural and social norms of these spaces are infused with the traditionally masculine and historically rooted prevalence of elitism, competitiveness, and ritualistic hazing of neophytes. Adding to this is an unwillingness to reject community members who support, and even glorify, these behaviors. Together, this makes working to embrace diversity from within open technology spaces a very difficult task. In addition, working to advance diversity in *isolated* open technology spaces means that the culture in mainstream spaces experiences no real shifts. In the end, these communities cannot overlook the importance of marrying the concepts of free speech and antiharassment as supporting one another. The lack of progress to date in balancing these twin ideals raises the question of whether or not open technology spaces are governable from within.

The author also discusses workplace policies and procedures that formally support diversity efforts. Some of these legitimize diversity work by arguing that it is a solution to workforce needs or a vehicle to create more innovative solutions to problems, thereby increasing corporate profits. The latter rationale can be problematic. Activist technologists are often motivated by the desire to right social wrongs or inequities. Diversity initiatives in technology motivated by increasing workforce and consumer markets, both political and economic motivators, can be at odds with each other. How? Not all IT jobs are high status and high paying. Indeed, many of these—data entry, call centers, telemarketing—are exactly the opposite. These low-level IT jobs are heavily staffed by women engaged in “offshore pink-collar IT work.” Pay and status are low. Dunbar-Hester notes that FLOSS communities and events operate on

volunteer time and effort, with the common goals of workplace advancement for women, working for the common good, increasing economic diversity, and helping people get jobs. Whether these efforts are successful in helping participants transfer these skills into high-pay/high-status IT jobs is less clear.

Lastly, the author devotes a chapter for acknowledging that diversity means far more than adding (white) women to the open technology ranks. This presents multiple challenges. First, how to change the normative male culture without replacing it with the normative female culture? Many women in open technology spaces do not embrace the latter any more than they do the former. Binary approaches can exclude other genders that have been well established in technology circles longer than in society at large. Women also face a double-bind: the challenge of being viewed as competent and likable. People of color are often hesitant to embrace the “hacker” identity because of the negative connotations. When white males engage in hacking, their behavior is often assumed to be harmless or mischievous. The same behavior by a person of color is more likely to be viewed as criminal. Because stereotypes of Asians paint them as better at coding, and so on, they may not experience neophyte hazing when they first enter these spaces. On the other hand, familial expectations may pressurize them to pursue more prestigious and lucrative careers in engineering or science. The real goal of diversity is to let people be accepted for who they are.

**IN CONCLUSION**, Dunbar-Hester notes that diverse hacking efforts in open technology communities have made some progress toward creating more inclusive environments. But these efforts remain limited in their approach and conflate technological participation with the social power that is an outgrowth of it. Framing diversity in open technology communities as a problem of representation is convenient and does produce some morally good outcomes. But in doing so, we ignore the real issues of culture, especially power and inequity, that lie at the heart of the problem. Techno-politics has to start by acknowledging technology’s role in dividing people into the haves (insiders with social power) and the have-nots (everyone else). It must recognize the limits of technology as a vehicle for

empowerment, what it can and cannot hope to achieve in the bid for equity. It must be mindful of its gender, race, and ethnicity-bound past. Hacker-developed solutions in open technology spaces are almost bound to fail in the pursuit of changing culture, social norms, and inequities. “Unequal participation in tech” is not “a tech problem with a tech solution” but a social problem. Building a

more democratic technology might be possible, but the democratic goals of diversity cannot be limited to technology alone. ■

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