Technology | CYBERTIMES   The New York Times ON THE WEB

Home   Site Index   Site Search   Forums   Archives   Marketplace

May 1, 1998

CYBER LAW JOURNAL   By CARL S. KAPLAN   Bio

For Their Civil Disobedience, the 'Sit-In' Is Virtual

By CARL KAPLAN

Don't call them hackers. Ricardo Dominguez and Stefan Wray consider themselves theorists and practitioners of "electronic civil disobedience."

And they plan to show what that newly coined term means in an online protest on May 10, on behalf of embattled Indian rebels in Mexico. On that day they will try to rally supporters around the world to temporarily disrupt -- but not destroy -- a still-to-be-determined Web site in Mexico or elsewhere in North America supportive of the policies of the Mexican government.

Credit:Rene Perez for CyberTimes

Stefan Wray, left, and Ricardo Dominguez at "The Thing."

"A cyber-terrorist acts anonymously and destructively a great deal of the time," said Dominguez, 39, a soft-spoken New York-based political activist, artist and computer technician. "But electronic civil disobedience, like its [real-world] antecedents, is about putting yourself on the line in a nonviolent way."

And unlike a classic act of real-word protest, for which students might perform a sit-in in front of a local consulate or in the office of a university president, the nature of the Internet allows for "a virtual sit-in on a mass, global level," Dominguez said.

Wray, a 37-year old graduate student at New York University who hosts a personal Web site devoted to the theory of electronic civil disobedience, added: "Why should we be anonymous? Obviously, we don't believe we are doing anything wrong."

Dominguez and Wray, who have known each other for several years, are both active in Internet-based organizations that support the Zapatista rebels in Mexico. Since the uprising of the mainly Indian guerrillas of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in 1994, Web-based human rights and progressive organizations around the world have networked with each other and the rebels to trade information on the tense situation in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The groups have also sent e-mails and faxes to Mexican officials to protest Mexican government policy.

But this traditional form of Web-based grass-roots organizing and informational exchange is taking a sharp turn into the future.

Last January, for example, a group of political activists from Italy, called the Anonymous Digital Coalition, posted a message in the Zapatista networks calling for a virtual sit-in at one of five Mexican sites on January 29, from 4 to 5 p.m., Greenwich Mean Time. The announcement suggested that "all netsurfers with ideals of justice" connect their browsers to one of the selected sites at the appointed time and manually hit the "reload" button every few seconds for the hour.

For Dominguez, who, among other things, works as editor of The Thing, a small ISP based in New York, and who has also written on the subject of "infowar" and electronic civil disobedience, the posting from Italy came as revelation. He decided that, along with some other artists and computer technicians, he would take the virtual sit-in tactic one step further.

Dominguez and two colleagues, including Brett Stalbaum, an artist and programmer based in San Jose, quickly designed a Web site called Flood Net, which automates the process of the virtual sit-in.

The way it works is simple: a Web surfer connects to Flood Net, which appears on the Internet only at an appointed time, so as to avoid detection. Flood Net automatically connects the surfer to a pre-selected Web site, and the software automatically hits the selected site's reload button every seven seconds. If thousands of surfers connect with Flood Net during a particular day, the mass of activists could disrupt the operations of the particular site.

In an early test of their system, Dominguez and Wray posted messages in the Zapatista networks in early April, calling for colleagues to link to Flood Net on April 10. The target that day was the Web site of President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico. According to Dominguez, 8,141 surfers around the world connected to Flood Net that day, which resulted in some slowing down and interruption of the Zedillo site. Dominguez added that a computer from Mexico tried to hack into Flood Net and disable its program, but was unsuccessful.

A spokesperson for the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., acknowledged that there was a protest action aimed at government Web sites on April 10. Although there was some disturbance, "there wasn't much negative impact," the spokesperson said.

On May 10, Mother's Day, Dominguez and Wray expect to roll out Flood Net for another spin. They say the targeted site, which will be selected at the last moment, could be in Mexico or elsewhere in North America. Dominguez said the targeted site would be selected for its symbolic value. "We're not out to interfere with a site that has valuable data," he said.

Dominguez added that he expects several Flood Net "mirror sites" to crop up on May 10 -- ensuring some measure of security from possible counter-action.

Recently, at the spare West Side offices of The Thing, Dominguez and Wray talked about their views of electronic civil disobedience. Dominguez, a former actor, has a low, deep voice and speaks in measured tones. Wray, who sports a mandatory graduate student beard, was more casual.

Both conceded that the tactics of the virtual sit-in would not directly force the Mexican government to change its policies. But that is not the point, they said. Rather, the protest tactic is designed to create a form of electronic theater that indirectly increases solidarity among activists and propagates a political message to "other layers" of the Internet.

The pair also acknowledged that their tactic is not universally condoned by their colleagues. One human rights group in Mexico, they said, recently posted a message objecting to the April invasion of Mexican cyberspace and questioned whether the electronic sit-in would invite retaliation. For these reasons, the friends said, they will consider targeting a site in the United States on May 10.

They do not think they are breaking any law. And even if they were, Dominguez said, the risks are inherent in the practice of civil disobedience.

"Sometimes if you sit in front of an office, they will say you are trespassing," he said. "The question is, whose law is more important -- the law of human rights or the local law of trespassing."

Mark D. Rasch, an Internet consultant and former head of the Justice Department's efforts to prosecute computer crime, said in an interview that participants in electronic sit-ins run a risk of violating a federal law, 18 U.S.C., section 1030 (a)(5)(A). That statute, he said, makes it a crime to intentionally distribute a program, software code or command with the intent to cause damage to another's Web site.

"These guys are at risk," said Rasch, referring to Dominguez and Wray and their colleagues. "It may be an electronic sit-in, but people get arrested at sit-ins," he said.

CYBER LAW
JOURNAL

David Ronfeldt, a senior social scientist at the Rand Corporation, a think tank in Santa Monica, Calif., is an expert on information age conflicts. He thinks electronic civil disobedience as practiced by Dominguez and Wray is not benign.

Internet links of interest to Cyber Law Journal readers

"I see it somewhere between a digital sit-in and 'cybotage,' " he said. "They are trying to crash Web pages and servers. It's aggressive."

Ronfeldt, who said he has visited Wray's personal Web site, and who sent

Wray an e-mail congratulating him on his theoretical essays, predicted that electronic civil disobedience will become a more common tool for political activists in the near future.

"Conflict in the information age will be more about disruption than destruction," Ronfeldt said. "And much of the disruption will be symbolic."

CYBER LAW JOURNAL is published weekly, on Fridays. Click here for a list of links to other columns in the series.

Related Sites
Following are links to the external Web sites mentioned in this article. These sites are not part of The New York Times on the Web, and The Times has no control over their content or availability. When you have finished visiting any of these sites, you will be able to return to this page by clicking on your Web browser's "Back" button or icon until this page reappears.

- United States law on fraud in connection with computers

- David Ronfeldt: Recent book on netwar he co-edited

- Stefan Wray's electronic civil disobedience site

Carl S. Kaplan at kaplanc@nytimes.com welcomes your comments and suggestions.

Home | Site Index | Site Search | Forums | Archives | Marketplace

Quick News | Page One Plus | International | National/N.Y. | Business | Technology |
Science | Sports | Weather | Editorial | Op-Ed | Arts | Automobiles | Books | Diversions
| Job Market | Real Estate | Travel

Help/Feedback | Classifieds | Services | New York Today