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| WORLD | U.S. | N.Y. / REGION | BUSINESS | TECHNOLOGY | SCIENCE | HEALTH | SPORTS | OPINION | ARTS | STYLE | TRAVEL | JOBS | REAL ESTATE | AUTOS |

'Hacktivists' of All Persuasions Take Their Struggle to the Web

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No slouches in packaging and self-promotion, the burgeoning computer underground has adopted a catchy term for the trend: they call it "hacktivism."

"Hacktivism is a way to be heard by millions," a group of three Mexican hackers known as X-Ploit wrote in an E-mail message to a reporter. "We want to speak out about what we and many, many people disagree with in this treasonous and corrupt government. If we protest both on line and off line, we'll have better chances to see a change."

The tactic is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. A group of Serbian computer hackers this month claimed responsibility for crashing a Web site promoting the ethnic Albanian cause in the Serbian province of Kosovo. The Serbian newspaper Blic quoted one of the hackers as saying, "We shall continue to remove ethnic Albanian lies from the Internet."

On Wednesday the group, called Black Hand, after a clandestine Serbian military organization at the turn of the century, attacked the site of the Croatian state-owned newspaper Vjesnik. Croatian hackers counterattacked the next day, inserting messages like "Read Vjesnick and not Serbian books" on the Web site of the Serbian National Library, Vjesnik reported yesterday.

For Small Groups, A Larger Presence

Guerrilla attacks on Web sites may seem more of a headline-grabbing ploy than true information warfare. But security experts said the recent spate of digital vandalism underscores the risk to companies and governments that increasingly rely on the Internet for commerce and communication.

"What this demonstrates is the capacity of groups with political causes to hack into systems," said Michael A. Vatis, chief of the National Information Protection Center, a new Federal agency. "I wouldn't characterize vandalizing Web sites as cyberterrorism, but the only responsible assumption we can make is there's more going on that we don't know about."

Established by Attorney General Janet Reno this year, the center is in part a response to the perception that "political forces which could not take on the United States in conventional military terms stand a better chance on an electronic battlefield," said Mr. Vatis, deputy assistant director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The potency of the slingshot approach is not lost on would-be hacktivists. "If you have 10 people at a protest, they don't do much of anything," said a Toronto-based computer jockey who calls himself Oxblood Ruffian. "If you have 10 people on line, they could cripple a network."

Oxblood is a member of Cult of the Dead Cow, a hacker group that recently reserved the Web address www.hacktivism.org as an Internet distribution hub for tools to assist others in subversive digital activism. He said the group was planning to attack the Internet operations of American companies doing business with China.

But the effectiveness of such actions is unclear, prompting a debate over how best to implement the hacktivist brand of political protest.

Under United States law, terrorism is defined as an act of violence for the purpose of intimidating or coercing a government or a civilian population. Breaking into a computer system and altering data are felonies.

For that reason, the members of the Electronic Disturbance Theater emphasize that the software they use to attack Web sites disrupts Internet traffic but does not destroy data. In the tradition of civil disobedience protests, they encourage mass participation and use their real names.

The group was forged in an on-line discussion among several American supporters of the Zapatistas, the first armed revolutionaries known to have solicited public sympathy for their struggle by publishing their communiques over the Internet.

On Nov. 22, the group says, it plans to attack the Web site of the School of the Americas, a United States Army training center for foreign military personnel, some of whom have been accused of human rights abuses.

Recent targets have included the sites of Mexico's President, Ernesto Zedillo, and of the United States Defense Department.

When on-line activists heed the call to "commence flooding!" they visit the group's Web site and click on an icon that launches a program called FloodNet. The software points their Web browser to the target of the attack, where it requests the same page over and over again at a rate of about 10 times per minute.

< PREVIOUS PAGE | 1 | 2 | 3 | NEXT PAGE >

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

WEEK IN REVIEW »

The Refined Art of Tastelessness

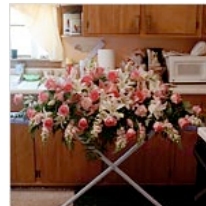OPINION »

Op-Ed: Drink Outside the Box

MEDIA & ADVERTISING »

Television Starts to Court the Young Voter

OPINION »

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U.S. »

Gunshots, Then Silence: And the Sorrow Spreads

TELEVISION »

Recalling a Mission to Capture an Era's Misery