

Many discussions about the ethical ramifications of computer hacking have occurred since the issue gained prominence. Some see the ethical issues involved as cut and dry, some consider ethical breaches only when laws have been broken and others consider certain types of hacking ethically sound and some types as ethically questionable. The first layer of this debate usually focuses on the definition of computer hacking and the motivation of the hackers.

Definitions of Hacking

Hacking occurs when someone intentionally accesses a computer without authorization. The term is often used to refer to a person with detailed computer knowledge who commits the act to accomplish criminal acts. The act often damages property, spreads viruses and causes financial loss. The New Hacker's Dictionary uses several definitions including someone who "enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities," "programs enthusiastically (even obsessively)," and "enjoys the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations."

Ethical Considerations by Motive

The New Hacker Dictionary and Marcia J. Wilson of Computerworld both define hackers while distinguishing them from hackers with intent to harm. Such a "cracker" is, according to the Hacker Dictionary, "a malicious meddler who tries to discover sensitive information by poking around." Wilson contrasts crackers with three other motivations she believes are ethically justified. "Hacktivists" infiltrate systems for political purposes; hobbyist hackers do so to learn and share with those in the hacking community; and research and security hackers are "those concerned with discovering security vulnerabilities and writing the code fixes." Wilson and others believe ethical issues arise in hacking when the goals are outside of these three categories. She considers political activism through computer hacking equitable to peaceful protests in the streets and points to the First and Fourth Amendments as justification.

Ethical Issues by Legality

One way that people can interpret actions for unethical behavior is considering the legality. The United States Credit Fraud and Abuse Act prohibits intentionally accessing another's computer system when it threatens the financial well-being of an individual or business to reveal state secrets, upset international communications, defraud, cause damage or aid extortion. States have their own laws as well.

Other Ethical Considerations

Other points considered in discussions of ethical hacking include the costs associated with security checks even when no alterations or damages have occurred. Many consider the high amount of adolescent participants and factor this into ethical judgments, believing the anonymity associated with hacking makes crimes more likely to happen than they would outside of cyberspace.

Key Concepts

- ethical computer hacking
- ethical issues hacking

- issues computer hacking

References

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Computer Hacking](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-computer/) [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-computer/]
- [USLegal: Defintions](http://definitions.uslegal.com/c/computer-hacking/) [http://definitions.uslegal.com/c/computer-hacking/]
- [NCSL: Computer Hacking](http://www.ncsl.org/IssuesResearch/TelecommunicationsInformationTechnology/ComputerHackingandUnauthorizedAccessLaws/tabid/13494/Default.aspx) [http://www.ncsl.org/IssuesResearch/TelecommunicationsInformationTechnology/ComputerHackingandUnauthorizedAccessLaws/tabid/13494/Default.aspx]
- [Computer World: Is Hacking Ethical?](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/91549/Is_hacking_ethical_) [http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/91549/Is_hacking_ethical_]
- [University of California at Berkeley: Hackers: Brian Harvey](http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~bh/hackers.html) [http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~bh/hackers.html]
- [Criminal Law Lawyer Source: Computer Hacking](http://www.criminal-law-lawyer-source.com/terms/computer-hacking.html) [http://www.criminal-law-lawyer-source.com/terms/computer-hacking.html]

Resources (Further Reading)

- [UIUC: Hacking](http://ed.uiuc.edu/wp/crime/hacking.htm) [http://ed.uiuc.edu/wp/crime/hacking.htm]