

Hacktivism: Serious or Just Silly?

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“This is the Internet, where we screw each other over for a jolt of satisfaction.”

LulzSec, June 17, 2011

Hacktivists often display antics and bravado, leaving us to wonder if we should even take them seriously. While LulzSec is making the headlines today for openly declaring that it hacks for laughs, others have gone before them. Following al-Qaeda’s terrorist attacks on 9-11 and the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, the hacktivist Fluffi Bunni altered a website to show the image of a computer with the message “If you want to see the Internet again, give us Mr. Bin Laden and \$5 million dollars in a paper bag. Love, Fluffi B” displayed on the monitor and a pink, stuffed rabbit sitting at the keyboard. This was accompanied by the headline “Fluffi Bunni Goes JIHAD!” and a rant about religion, capitalism, and violence. Another group, GForce Pakistan, announced on a hacked site the formation of the Al Qaeda Alliance Online, their support of bin Laden, and pending attacks against US websites – but then wrote that they “won’t hurt any data, as it’s [sic] unethical,” that they were “cyber crusaders” not “cyber terrorists,” and that all they wanted was “PEACE for everyone.”

Yet, hacktivism is more than a silly nuisance. Victims, who often have little if anything to do with the grievances expressed, incur real costs. Following the publication of cartoons featuring the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, outraged Islamic hackers defaced thousands of websites in Denmark and elsewhere that were unrelated to the publication. Likewise, when the relocation of a Soviet-era war memorial sparked a cyber protest with denial-of-service attacks against Estonia in 2007, the attacks, especially those against banks, affected a large segment of Estonia’s highly wired population. Operation Anti-Security, LulzSec’s latest effort in cooperation with the hacktivist group Anonymous, aims “to steal and leak any classified government information, including email spools and documentation. Prime targets are banks and other high-ranking establishments.” Already, the group has disclosed passwords and other personal data, putting persons at risk of identity theft and fraud.

While serious, hacktivism has not risen to the level of cyber terrorism. Hackers associated with or sympathetic to al-Qaeda have expressed an interest in conducting highly damaging attacks, but so far their attacks have been mainly limited to relatively minor denial-of-service attacks and web defacements. They have not demonstrated a capability to conduct attacks that would lead to death or disrupt critical infrastructures such as the power grid. Further, most hacktivists, even cyber jihadists, aren’t interested in causing such damage. They are out to protest – and maybe have some fun.

One danger of hacktivism is that it can be all too easy to implicate foreign governments in cyber attacks, potentially impacting foreign policy or even leading to state-level hostilities. The 2007

cyber attacks against Estonia, for example, were blamed on the Russian government, as were similar attacks against Georgia in 2008. In both cases, patriotic hackers launched attacks and posted tools and targets of attack on public sites. While claims were made of a possible Moscow connection, they were not backed up by solid evidence.

Cyber attacks of all sorts have become increasingly prevalent and costly. It isn't just hacktivism we have to worry about, but also cyber crime and espionage. When groups such as LulzSec are able to flaunt their attacks and operate with impunity, it does not bode well for the future. Perhaps it is a good sign, then, that other hackers, including Web Ninjas, are outing LulzSec and attacking their website, even as LulzSec outs the hackers who out them. But with these antics and names like Web Ninjas, can we take this seriously?

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