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Austin group complains of hack attack

Online political warriors savage opposition Web sites.



Andrew Price/AMERICAN-STATESMAN
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Kfir Alfia, a co-founder of the Austin-based group ProtestWarrior, which counters anti-war protests, says that attacks on left-leaning Web sites last year were made by a man who is no longer a member.

By [Asher Price](#)

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In the 1992 movie "Sneakers," Martin Bishop and his crackerjack hacking partner Cosmo infiltrate the Federal Reserve mainframe in 1969 and orchestrate a \$25,000 donation from the Republican Party to the Black Panthers, as well as a generous contribution from Richard Nixon to the National Association to Legalize Marijuana.

The plot seemed far-fetched at the time. But this month, an Austin-based group called ProtestWarrior, which crashes anti-war demonstrations and produced a video that attacks Middle Eastern "Islamofascists," informed its members that their credit card information might have been compromised after a Chicago-based hacker cracked the site's code; ProtestWarrior claims that the hacker had intended to give donations to the American Civil Liberties Union, among other organizations.

The FBI is investigating, but no charges have been filed.

Last year, a group of hackers associated with the Black Hat Hacker's Bloc wormed its way into conservative political and news Web sites, grabbed credit card information and donated \$2,400 to groups that included the Sierra Club and the Animal Protection Institute, according to the National Journal's Technology Daily.

The activity is a new front in a cyber-political war being waged with young, committed hackers as foot soldiers. With dizzying technical skills and a political ideology spurring them on, these "hacktivists" have engaged in a series of confrontations that veer between annoying mischief and possibly criminal attempts to seize checkbooks.

The latest battle involves ProtestWarrior, which dispatches its members to demonstrate against protesters at anti-war rallies or the president's inauguration with pert, if snarky, slogans such as "Except for Ending Slavery, Fascism, Nazism and Communism, War has Never Accomplished Anything."

The ProtestWarriors and the person they say hacked their Web site in January have addressed the episode on, what else, the Web.

A newsletter item posted July 5 on ProtestWarrior.com claims that Chicago-based hacker Jeremy Hammond and the Internet Liberation Front penetrated the Web site and stole credit card information. In February, ProtestWarrior administrators discovered the breach and reported it to the FBI. Kfir Alfia, a co-founder of ProtestWarrior, said 5,007 members had their information compromised.

According to the newsletter item, the ProtestWarrior administrators did not inform members until July because "our customers were already protected and we didn't want to jeopardize the ongoing FBI investigation of Jeremy and his 'hactivist' army."

Hammond has started a Web site, freejeremy.com, which carries the tagline "Freedom and Justice for Political Hacktivists in an age of FBI Intimidation."

That site claims that nine FBI agents raided Hammond's Chicago apartment in March, seized electronic equipment — including an Xbox video game console — and questioned him about the ProtestWarrior hack.

According to the Web site, Hammond is a founder of HackThisSite.org, which teaches network security skills through hacking challenges. (An FBI spokeswoman confirmed the search warrant but would not comment on an ongoing federal investigation.)

"The charges (the ProtestWarriors) are alleging are incredibly overblown," Hammond, 20, said from Chicago. "They want to paint us as criminals and cyberterrorists. No one's personal information was compromised or billed.

"We're not out to screw people individually," he added. "There's an important difference between malicious and criminal hacking and people who hack for social justice."

Hammond said ProtestWarrior was behind the hacks of left-leaning Web sites last year and "had made themselves a very big target." Those hacks were committed by a man who is no longer a ProtestWarrior, Alfia said.

The tit-for-tat attacks are one way that classic guerrilla protest tactics — running interference, in protest parlance — have translated to the Internet.

"Say I want to protest the Hummer, because I think it's bad for the environment. I can go in front of corporate headquarters or a dealership, and I can reach the people I need to," said Jennifer Granick, executive director of the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School. "But there's not the same spatial relationship on the Internet. Nobody's going to necessarily see my site. That's where hacktivism comes from: People who

go to that Web site to look for a car get alternate information."

Web sites belonging to President Bush's re-election committee and the National Republican Committee were targeted by hackers at least three times between 2000 and November's election. In October, the campaign site and the committee site were down for six hours.

Politically motivated hacking has become so common that Zone H, a Web site that tracks defacements of other sites, has dedicated a section to documenting the political hacks. In the process, the term "hacktivism" has been wrenched from its original definition, long-time techies say.

"It originally meant using and extending technology for social justice," said Joe Testa, a computer programmer in Buffalo, N.Y., who runs the news section of the Web site Hacktivism. "We're not about defacing Web sites."

Left-wing sites have proved to be targets as vulnerable as their right-wing counterparts.

"Imperialism is non-existent," read part of a hacker's message left on Colorado's Independent Media site, a bulletin board filled with posts opposing Bush administration policies. "Our soldiers are dying over seas (sic) to give men, women, and children a taste of freedom and you call them imperialists. You are nothing but pigs."

An article called Notes from the Hacker Underground, posted at HackThisSite.org, took measure of what it characterized as right-wing tactics. "Common activities range from flooding message boards, faking votes and reviews in online polls, releasing personal information of key organizers, spreading false rumors and scandals, etc."


The January episode was not the first time ProtestWarrior fell victim to hackers. The group's administrators say the site was hacked last fall, and e-mail addresses and phone information belonging to members were released on left-leaning Web sites.

The group has also been infiltrated by imposters. Responding to an e-mail soliciting new operations for the Spokane, Wash., area ProtestWarrior chapter, a satiric blogger known as Gen. JC Christian wrote, "When I look at our membership, I see a lot of able-bodied men and women of military age. I say we hold a rally at the recruiting station. Then, after a few speeches, we all go in and sign up. Heck, we can always fight the liberals later. It's time to take the Protest Warrior flag to Iraq."

After the chapter's administrator discovered the general's own blog, in which he pokes fun at the president's policies with such characters as "Republican Jesus," he was excommunicated.

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