“Privacy is the power to selectively reveal oneself”: identity, anonymity, and morality among digital rights activists and hackers

In this presentation, I will examine the social worlds and situated practices of hackers and privacy activists in Germany and Denmark, paying particular attention to the strategies these individuals use to mask their locations, communications, and legal identities. My fieldwork at hacker conferences, technology festivals, and privacy workshops has generated a rich body of ethnographic material that raises critical questions about political engagement, morality, identity, and the self.

For the hacker activists (“hacktivists”) that I follow, hacking refers to playful, inventive and subversive technological exploration that is often in front of or outside the law; hackers thus skirt the boundaries of both technical and legal possibility. Hacktivists work to expose security flaws and other problems that legal systems have yet to recognize. Through public-facing, curtain-raising hacks, they attempt to influence legislation and technological standards, encourage state transparency simultaneously as they advocate individual privacy, and raise public understanding of technological concepts. This presentation will explore how hacktivists engage in public debate on the basis of their technical expertise and how they perpetuate, reorganize, and disrupt popular imaginations of technology and surveillance through these pursuits. Additionally, I argue that hacktivist critiques are embedded within cultural and political liberalism and will demonstrate how liberal sensibilities animate the specific type of moral and political projects they participate in.

If you are interested in recent news stories about data breaches (Facebook/Cambridge Analytica), facial recognition, and internet surveillance, my work touches upon these topics! This presentation is based off of one year of research I conducted as a Fox International Fellow before starting at Stanford. My dissertation work and broader research interests are about technology, surveillance, computer vision, and the environment.

Nina Dewi Horstmann
Doctoral Candidate, Stanford University

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Building 50, 51A