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The Hacker Syndrome: Review

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Abstract

The Hacker Syndrome tells the story of Stephan Urbach, a man who is slowly revealed as an activist and a hero to those involved in the Arab Spring. A man who, as the story unfolds, forgets his own needs - and breaks down. This is also a story of distance - physical and mental. A story of the importance that information plays in people's lives and how some people are willing to risk their lives for the world to know what is going on. Radio documentaries and features usually require an emotional attachment to the character, while computers, and often the people who are obsessed with them, are emotionless. There is an inherent conflict here. In *The Hacker Syndrome*, we rarely feel an emotional link to Stephan Urbach. Maybe he is protecting himself. Maybe the interviewer didn't get close enough. As a listener you might even wonder why you are listening to him - why is this man important? Urbach is merely a stranger to us, it's impossible to get close - until the story suddenly evolves... Stephan Urbach's work is questioned by others in the hacker community. And soon the people that Stephan helps are dying. One after another. Stephan Urbach gives us the key to his world when he says: 'We don't say good bye in the moment when the person dies anymore, but in the moment when the user is gone.' And after that, the distance between us - Stephan Urbach and the people that he tries to help - reaches an Archimedean point - we suddenly *understand*.

Keywords

audio feature, radio documentary, hacker, Arab Spring

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The Hacker Syndrome (Germany) WDR 2013

A Feature by Johannes Nichelmann

Speakers: Navid Akhavan, Max Woithe and Bettina Kurth.

Technical Realisation: Jonas Bergler

Production assistant: Dirk Leyers

Producer: Nikolai von Koslowski

Redaktion: Leslie Rosin

Produced by Westdeutschen Rundfunks (WDR) 2013

Duration: 52' 56'' (German version) English transcript begins at 4'22'' in pdf. First words: 'Mein erste..' ('My first..'). [Audio prior to that is ambient introduction]

Audio link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csh57N3LOW4>

THE HACKER SYNDROME

Reviewed by Martin Johnson

The Hacker Syndrome tells the story of Stephan Urbach, a man who is slowly revealed as an activist and a hero in some communities. A man who, as the story unfolds, forgets his own needs and breaks down. This is also a story of distance - physical and mental. A story of the importance that information plays in people's lives and how some people are willing to risk their lives for the world to know what is going on.

The definition of a hacker is a person who, through the help of technology, reveals, manipulates and knows a digital system from within (A cracker is someone who breaks down digital security walls - although a hacker can also be a cracker). The term hacker was coined in the '60s at MIT in Massachusetts to describe people who could understand the university's complex model train system.

Hacking, and also programming, creates an exoskeleton of cool logic in a world that is filled with illogical human experiences. Logic formed by structure and repetition. Pattern. In other words, if understood it can create a sensation of being part of a larger cosmic order. There are no emotions in numbers and letters written in order to program, or to hack, there is only a goal. Now hackers can have different goals – but if the goal is to manipulate or learn a system - the interesting

question becomes - what does a hacker do with his knowledge? Does he manipulate a system in order to change it in a direction that he or she believes is better? Or does he just let it be?

Our main character Stephen Urbach's first introduction to this world of logic is through the Commodore 64 (one of the bestselling home computers produced between 1982 and 1994, which could be connected to the television, making it popular for games), and after that he lives in the world of computers.

It is a portrait of Stephan Urbach, slowly told to us through different layers - an interview with him, his meeting with his former flatmate, through a chat room conversation and finally through a speech that he holds in front of an audience. He seems to be a reserved person, uncomfortable talking with other people. But after almost 20 minutes we realize that Stephan was actually someone who helped make the Arab Spring possible.

The Arab Spring was a spark that started a democratic movement in Arabic countries, ignited by protests, demonstrations and a great belief in change. A spring that claimed many lives and in the long run changed not only the countries where the demonstrations were held, but also had global implications, with the escalation of the conflict in Syria.

The documentary's main character is working for a Swedish lobby firm Telekomix and like the rest of the world, its employers watched at a distance as the uprising grew stronger and stronger. But the government that was fighting the democratic movement - like an organism fighting for survival - tried to protect itself through all means possible. They identified the protesters through social media, through Facebook, through emails - and as in Egypt, eventually shut down the entire internet. Without any internet, they cut away the means for protesters to get information about what was happening to the non-Arab world, and also made it harder for those demonstrating to communicate.

On 25th January 2011, the Egyptian State Security Investigation Service, Amn El Dawla, ordered Twitter to be blocked; the following day Facebook was shut down, and finally on 27th January, the government shut down the internet and the means for people to send SMS. For four days Egypt was without internet access, until the morning of the 2nd of February 2011 when it was up and running again. Four days.

After 20 minutes we finally appreciate the importance of our main character. He helped the world get information about the protests against the oppressive regime by circumnavigating the internet blockade during those four days and giving internet access to protesters.

When we understand this we at last get close to Stephan Urbach as he stands in front of an audience - an audience of real people as he tells the interviewer. Later he comments that he doesn't differentiate between people that he meets in real life and the people that he meets online. Even though Stephan doesn't care about distance when he connects to people, it is evident that there is a distance between the author of this work and Stephan. It takes a long while until we really get close to Stephan Urbach. It is not until it becomes clear to us the consequences of what he has done that he loses his walls of protection and we actually feel emotions in his voice.

Radio documentaries and features usually require an emotional attachment to the character, while computers, and often the people who are obsessed with them, are emotionless. There is an inherent conflict here.

Radio was born out of the head of the Scottish mathematician James Maxwell and later Heinrich Hertz, who proved for the first time that there is more in the world than we can see - the air is actually filled with waves - waves of energy that keeps moving until it reaches an object. One could only imagine the feeling of listening to radio when it was first introduced - here was a voice talking to the listener - but with *no body*. Does that mean that the person existed at two places at the same time?

Thanks to the work of Maxwell and Hertz, radio was born, and it became the child of literature and theatre. It took literature's democratic approach to stories and from theatre it took the importance of how you actually say something - the emotions the voice can convey. Thus it became possible for listeners to create pictures inside their own head and feel emotions as they were listening to the radio. In *The Hacker Syndrome*, we rarely feel an emotional link to Stephan Urbach. Maybe he is protecting himself. Maybe the interviewer didn't get close enough. As a listener you might even wonder why you are listening to him - why is this man important? Urbach is a stranger to us, it's impossible to get close - until the story suddenly evolves and we become more interested in the work that he has done than in him as a person. The program shifts pace at

around 39 minutes, when Stephen Urbach's voice suddenly changes and he ceases to be a stranger.

With radio, we as a listener strive to experience the opposite of what a programmer tries to achieve; we long for emotions, however illogical they are, in order to understand our place in the world. We want not an exoskeleton, but we want to get into the marrow of the endoskeleton that is hidden somewhere underneath our skin and flesh.

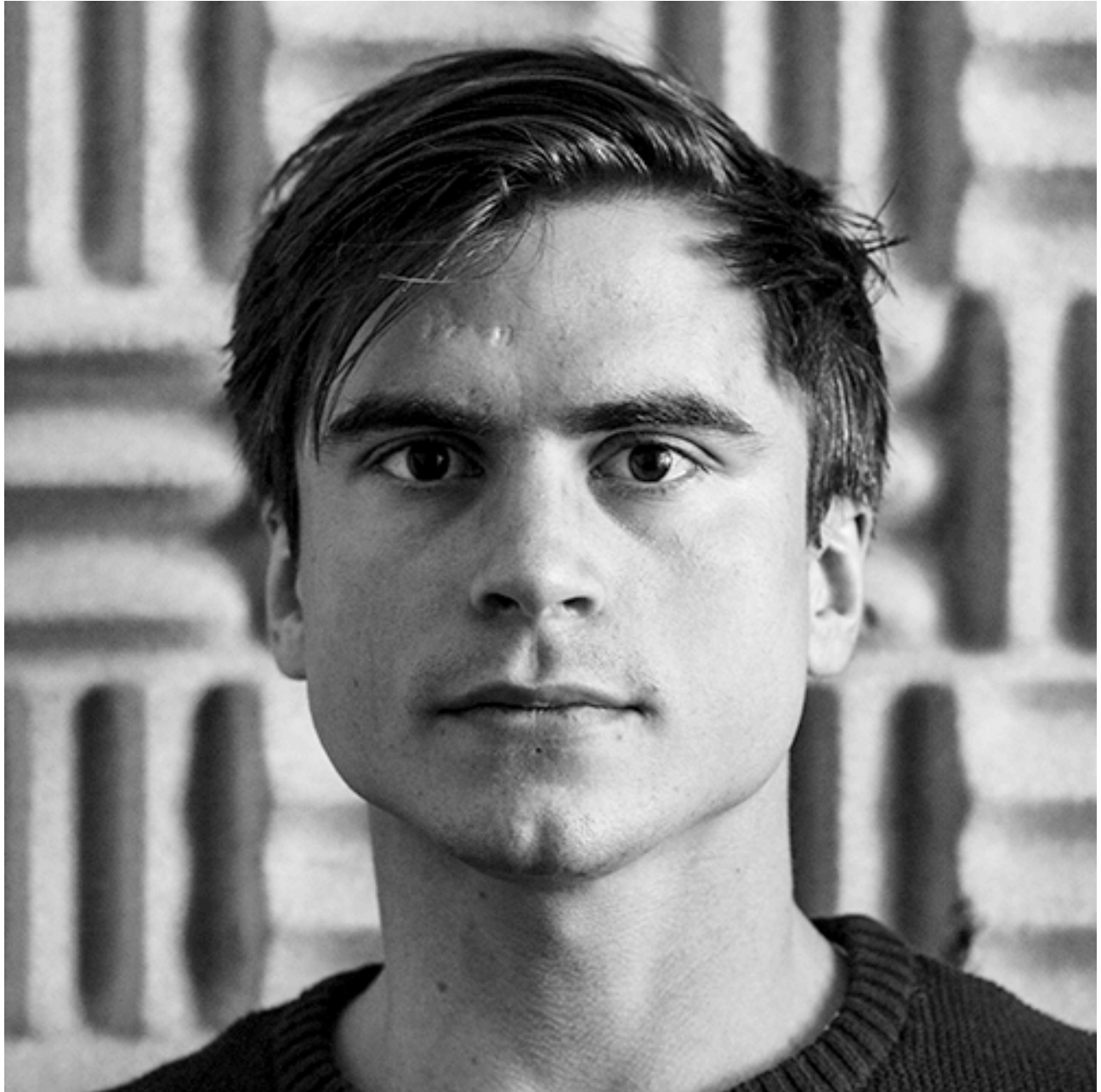
What Stephan Urbach and Telekomix did when the internet shut down in Egypt gave people the chance to get information out to the rest of the world. With the help of modems, connected in Europe, they sent faxes with information about how to reconnect to the internet and bypass the government blocks, to all the numbers that they could find in universities, libraries, hotel lobbies and suddenly there is a channel - a thin, slow life-line to the rest of the world.

After Egypt, Stephen Urbach started to help people in Syria. In secret chat rooms, protected from the spying eyes of the government he gets close to the people inside the country, helping them get information about their struggle to the rest of the world. But the difference from the uprising in Egypt is that the fight is more muddled, it is hard to understand who is fighting against whom - who is really the enemy?

Suddenly Stephan Urbach's work is questioned by others in the hacker community. And soon the people that Stephan helps are dying. One after another. Stephan Urbach forgets himself, his needs and becomes depressed. He even considers killing himself.

Stephan Urbach gives us the key to his world when he says: *'We don't say goodbye in the moment when the person dies anymore, but in the moment when the user is gone.'* And after that the distance between us, Stephan Urbach and the people that he tries to help reaches an Archimidean point - we suddenly *understand*.

We feel with Stephan, and we grieve the people that he has tried to help, even though we have never met them, and never will. In the same way, we will never meet Stephan, but after hearing *The Hacker Syndrome* we will never forget what he has done.



Martin Johnson is the creative director at Ljudbang Productions in Stockholm, Sweden and the co-founder in 2015 of The Sarah Awards, which celebrate fiction for the 21st century - and its podcast Serendipity. In 2008 he won the Prix Italia for his documentary *My Father Takes a Vacation*. In 2013 he was awarded the Swedish Writers Union's radio prize for his unique and poetic work as a radio producer. In 2014 he won a Gold Award at the New York Radio Festival together with Ciaran Cassidy for his documentary *The Echo Chamber*. His work has been broadcast around the world, while his collection of essays, *The Ocean*, was published in 2012 to critical acclaim and has been translated into several languages.