

# YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

“Making revolution is not a crime!” This catchy turn of phrase is often attributed to Jian Qing, otherwise known as Madame Mao, otherwise known as one of the notorious Gang of Four – the group of former Chinese leaders who stood trial in 1980 for launching the devastating and discredited Cultural Revolution in China.

I’ve always found this quotation very unsettling. Not that it is always wrong; it is just that it is pretty clearly not always right. On the surface, these words seem like the perfect battle cry for the downtrodden to stand firm against oppression. But at a closer look, this philosophy comes with some bold assumptions. The statement would seem to allow any would-be revolutionary to operate without hindrance of any particular legal code – so long as their actions occur within the course of making revolution. But what is a revolution – and what is a crime? The quote appears to leave such things to the eye of the beholder.

Of course, not every revolutionary is an acolyte of Madame Mao – in fact, it would be difficult to find more than a few revolutionaries out in the world who wish they had been in the Gang of Four. But the quote underscores the perils of adopting an identity by defining a community of opposition.

The recent activities of activist hackers has shed light on some important questions, but it has also raised other equally important and possibly more complex questions that seem to exist outside of that light. The media seems to ask us either to celebrate or denounce these activities as a kind of brand identification – as if we were cheering for or against a sports team. Is the man behind the mask Robin Hood or the Unabomber? That all depends on what just happened – not on *how* it happened.

A popular viewpoint holds that technology is some kind of specialized vocabulary of magic. Anyone who is good at wielding this magic is kind of like a wizard, and you can’t stop a wizard from doing magic because that’s what wizards do. What scares me about this view is that, ultimately, it is all about power, and our society seems to work best when everyone wields power from within an ethical framework that provides the capacity for oversight and self-restraint. I guess if real wizards were out there, the most important aspect of their training might be learning when *not* to do magic, and maybe that part of the instruction manual is what needs to get copied to some of the techno-wizards at work in the world today.

The important thing, when viewing any act of defiance, is to reserve the right to evaluate it for what it is and not be carried along by some overarching revolutionary zeal. Exposing the illegal activities of governments, such as bribery and the assassi-

nation of political opponents, certainly could be a legitimate exercise in civil disobedience. Denying the free speech of opponents through DoS attacks and releasing the credit card numbers of customers who do business with companies who are opposed to your views are not necessarily equivalent actions.

The Internet revolutionaries of today are loose-knit collections of individuals – each with highly individual motivations. In that sense, the world of international cyber-politics doesn’t have just one revolution but many revolutions occurring simultaneously. So shop for the sans-culotte hat that fits your head, but just remember that a revolution that doesn’t respect the ideals of privacy and free speech isn’t really a revolution – it is just a war.



Joe Casad,  
Editor in Chief

