Interview with Kortney Ryan Ziegler of the Trans*H4CK Project

New media technologies—from the Web to social media to mobile apps—provide a platform for trans activism, identity formation, and community building outside the analog confines of space and time. The recurring New Media section will feature projects that examine how trans lives penetrate and are penetrated by the mediatization of culture.
—Editors

Abstract *TSQ* New Media editor Tobias Raun interviews Kortney Ryan Ziegler, the organizer of the Trans*H4CK hackathon, which took place in Oakland, California, in September 2013. The hackathon brought forty transgender, gender nonconforming, cisgender, and queer people together to create digital tools and content for trans communities. Raun and Ziegler discuss the usefulness of social entrepreneurship models to trans community formation, the importance of fostering digital activism by and for underrepresented communities, and the possibilities of circumventing traditional grant-making institutions by raising seed money for trans activism through crowd funding.

"Hackathons" started out as events exclusively for technophiles with interests in coding, data, and computer programming. Recently, however, hackathons have invited the participation of community members to address social issues. Created by Kortney Ryan Ziegler, Trans*H4CK is a social justice project that encourages the development of technology that will socially empower trans people. Trans*H4CK was the first transgender hackathon that aimed to address issues specific to the transgender community. To kick off the project, Trans*H4CK hosted a hackathon in September 2013. As the word hackathon suggests, this was an intense two-day hacking marathon during which programmers, developers, designers, entrepreneurs, thinkers, and community members brainstormed ideas and shared skills to create content or tools for trans communities.

The event took place at the Betti Ono Gallery in Oakland, California, and was attended by forty transgender, gender nonconforming, cisgender, and queer people. Ziegler decided to locate the event in Oakland, a majority nonwhite city, rather than San Francisco, to ensure that a diverse group of participants would be welcome. Over two days, participants got to know each other, formed teams, and heard a panel discussion about the social problems affecting trans and gender-nonconforming people, like high unemployment rates (especially for trans people of color), homelessness, overwhelming discrimination, and inadequate health care and legal services. And they hacked, some overnight. Set up as a competition, the event would award first prize to the individual or team who created the most innovative new use of technology for trans people. The judges were all trans social media producers and advocates: blogger Monica "The Transgriot" Roberts, YouTube vlogger Erin Armstrong, and artist, student, and trans youth advocate Benji Delgadillo.

The exchange between interviewer Tobias Raun, editor of the New Media section (identified here as TSQ) and the organizer of Trans*H4CK Kortney Ryan Ziegler (KRZ) took place over e-mail just before and after the Trans*H4CK hackathon. Using e-mail for the interview seemed both suitable and at the same time a little old school, considering the universe of new media communication technologies now easily available. But with constraints of space (between California and Denmark), time (a nine-hour difference in times zones), and a concussion (Tobias) as well as the all-consuming work of running the event itself (Kortney), e-mail was the obvious choice.

TSQ: *When and why did you get the idea to create the Trans*H4CK project?*

KRZ: I got the idea after participating in other hackathons concerned with social justice. Each time, myself along with a team of creative thinkers collectively made prototypes of mobile apps that had the potential to affect diverse communities. I felt that this model could be very applicable to transgender advocacy, since our community has historically created community through engaging various tech mediums.

TSQ: *What actually happened at the hackathon? Who came and who interacted with whom? What was the atmosphere like?*

KRZ: While the goal of Trans*H4CK was to collaborate on tech innovation, what happened over the weekend was pretty unique. There was an impressive turnout of trans people who work in tech, such as engineers from Twitter and Google, along with artists and activists from all types of backgrounds. There were also allies to the community who showed up to code and create community. Everyone

felt accepted and safe and ready to work on improving the lives of those of us in the room and the extended trans community.

TSQ: *Reading your blog post "How Thinking Like a Social Entrepreneur Can Shift the Transgender Movement" (Ziegler 2013), I see you suggest new ways of thinking transgender advocacy that is not afraid to partner outside the LGBT umbrella. You mention self-financing instead of the constant cycle of fundraising and seeking out corporate partnerships. Can you elaborate on that, and on your own strategies in this respect developing Trans*H4CK?*

KRZ: We are living in a moment in which different sources of capital are more readily accessible due to the breaking down of boundaries that technology affords. For example, sending a simple tweet requesting philanthropic advice can open up the doors to venture capitalists, investors, and donors that are interested in financing socially driven projects. Because of this, I think it is important for all of us interested in LGBT advocacy to reach out to different sources beyond the expected grants and donations that are consistently dwindling.

TSQ: *Who have you partnered with to make Trans*H4CK a reality, socially and financially?*

KRZ: I have been very lucky to partner with Mozilla, a nonprofit tech company that privileges open-source data, and the Kapor Center for Social Impact, which funds early-stage tech ventures focused on underrepresented communities. With their help and a successfully run crowd-funding campaign, I was able to successfully finance Trans*H4CK. I also developed a way to leverage the power of Twitter networks through creating Social Media Partnership positions that provided official hackathon sponsorship in exchange for weekly promotion of the event. It helped tremendously with bringing notoriety to Trans*H4CK.

TSQ: *Has this been a perfect match so far?*

KRZ: It has been perfect, because the mission of everyone involved with Trans*H4CK was to elevate the voices of trans people, and that is exactly what we did.

TSQ: *What potentials and what risks do you see in, for instance, Google Inc. or Apple investing in "transgender empowerment"?*

KRZ: I think there are risks involved with any entity investing in trans empowerment that is not explicitly trans focused. But as an entrepreneur, I think those are risks worth taking when the benefit of sustaining trans lives outweighs the fear of potential disempowerment.

TSQ: *In your work as an academic and as a cultural producer making films and blogging, you focus on increasing awareness of and visibility for trans people of color. How do you see the utilization of technology as a way to help create further awareness and bridge race and class division?*

KRZ: I think that technology can foster many types of bridges across communities for the many reasons you expressed in this question. We can now connect with people we weren't able to before, we can hear their voices and see their faces, and that dramatically changes awareness.

TSQ: *Many researchers, myself included, agree that the rise in trans visibility and awareness is greatly amplified by the Internet. More and diverse trans narratives have surfaced, and community building and mobilization have advanced at speeds that were not possible in the era of print culture and face-to-face meetings. And the participants of the Trans*H4ckathon showed how technology can be a tool for empowering trans individuals. However, I wonder if we as trans activists, cultural producers, and researchers should pay more attention to who and how information technology might disempower within the trans community?"*

KRZ: I think one of the faults we have as cultural critics is to focus on things that might bring us harm in order to prevent it. In doing so, we block out the power inherent in seeing the bigger positive picture that expanding modes of communication through technology affords. I hope that we do continue to critique technology, especially as it concerns digital divides, but to also see how certain types of tech keep us alive.

TSQ: *Can you talk about a few specific programs or apps that came out of the hackathon?*

KRZ: All of the projects were creative and well designed given the short amount of time teams had to produce them. The first prize went to Trans*ResourceUS, a searchable and editable Web and mobile wiki that provides information on employment, housing, and health. Second place went to Dottify.me, a social media mapping service that streamlines and makes anonymous trans surveys to better curate data. The Trans Health Access Wiki collects information through the wiki model to give trans people information about the health coverage available in their state. You can see these projects and others online at www.hackerleague.org /hackathons/trans-star-h4ck/hacks.

Tobias Raun, New Media section editor, is an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Roskilde (Denmark). He is the author of "DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-Representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube," in A. Karatzogianni and A. Kuntsman's edited volume *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* (2012).

Kortney Ryan Ziegler, PhD, is a social entrepreneur who focuses on sustainability and scalability for transgender-led enterprises.

Reference

Ziegler, Kortney Ryan. 2013. "How Thinking Like a Social Entrepreneur Can Shift the Transgender Movement." *Huffington Post*, March 27. www.huffingtonpost.com/kortney-ryan-ziegler -phd/how-thinking-like-a-socia_b_2960690.html.