
METABOLIK BIOHACKLAB

BIOHACKLAB

METABOLIK IS THE HACKLAB OF UDONDO GAZTETXEA, the self-run squat-cum-cultural centre of Leioa (a suburb of Bilbao). The lab was created four years ago, in 2001, when the second hackmeeting in Spain was held in Udondo. After the meeting, several participants from the area decided to get together and set up a permanent group in the *gaztetxe* (young people's centre) which would allow us to continue experimenting with and learning more about **this technology and its social aspects**. With the backing of the *gaztetxe*—which opened its doors to us—and the hackmeeting—which had given us the chance to meet in the first place—we also began to organise ourselves along assembly lines and to co-operate on an entirely horizontal basis.

Instead of beginning by theorising about our situation and unnecessarily postponing actually getting down to work, we were very keen to start putting **a large number of projects** into operation between all of us, and we began working together to design and implement a whole host of activities. Nonetheless, at the same time as we were having fun carrying out the various projects, we also analysed our actions and continued our deliberations through our weekly assemblies in the *gaztetxe* and the permanent virtual assembly (via a mailing list).

We have always been involved in a range of very different interests and motivations, and we even differ in our definition of the term “hacker” itself. But far from representing a barrier or a limitation for the members of Metabolik, this disparity has been extremely enriching for us all. It has allowed us to take on a wide range of different projects, keep a continuous flow of technical and political knowledge running amongst ourselves and to remain **open at all times to new collaboration agreements and ideas**.

THE HACKLAB

THE FIRST OF OUR PROJECTS CONSISTED OF PREPARING ONE OF THE SPACES IN THE GAZTETXE (the library/cinema) to house **the physical part of the hacker laboratory**. We took the occasion to paint and clean the area and adapt the furniture and we also began collecting any material we could get our hands on: power cables, plugs, network cables, screens, computers, computer parts, printers, hubs, etc. We got all this material from what was left over after the hackmeeting in the *gaztetxe*, from contributions from people in the hacklab, from people in Udondo and from a few furtive visits to recycling points. Gradually we managed to assemble and install a number of **computers with GNU/Linux** and a small network to interconnect them. We also installed and configured a firewall which offered us a secure Internet connection—for us and also for any visitors to Udondo, because the *gaztetxe* is always open to the general public. Indeed, we set up two computers in the common area of the *gaztetxe* as a sort of Internet cafe which were very well received. On request, we also prepared a computer to play music in the bar. We reserved an area in the hacklab for “junk”, because we were constantly having to test broken hardware, find replacement parts for upgrading the computers and generally experiment with any new ideas that came to us.

The hacklab's maintenance work has continued over the years, going through better and worse periods, but the fact that we have our own laboratory to learn in and to run the physical side of Metabolik for ourselves has undoubtedly been extremely gratifying and edifying.

COURSES

ONCE WE HAD A FEW COMPUTERS UP AND RUNNING AND WE'D SET UP THE NETWORK, we began preparing courses, workshops and talks on the subjects that interested us. On the one hand, we organised a number of courses, because people wanted to share their knowledge on free software (Debian, bash), programming languages (C, perl, semantic web), electronics (FM transmitter), artificial intelligence (RNA, genetic algorithms), etc. But we soon began to realise that it was very important for us at Metabolik to let the wider public know about a tool as important as this technology and its social aspects. We organised basic courses on hardware, operating systems, networks, programming, etc. for people from the *gaztetxe*,

but also courses on free software, GNU/Linux, cyber-rights, cryptography, the new law governing information services and e-commerce (LSSICE), etc.

Like the upkeep of the hacklab, this work of training and **sharing knowledge (amongst ourselves and outwards)** also turned into an ongoing project. We have just finished rebuilding the hacklab and the machines in it, and to celebrate the event we are organising a season of practical courses and workshops ranging from poster layout (GIMP, Inkscape, Scribus) to 3-D programming (python + opengl), through further courses on programming (HTML, PHP, SQL) and other subjects (pure data). The course which has attracted most students—about fifteen—is one we have already organised several times and which we consider to be very important from a political point of view: the course in GNU/Linux, the most widely used free operating system.

KALE-HACKING

BUT THROUGHOUT THIS TIME WE HAVE NOT ONLY WORKED ON ORGANISING COURSES, workshops, talks, round tables and similar events. One of the first actions we organised for the general public was on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Internet communication medium **Indymedia Euskal Herria**, with which Metabolik has a number of links. The action consisted of organising a *hacking the streets* event over a one day period in the Plaza Unamuno in Bilbao, complete with chairs, tables, computers, an (wi-fi) Internet connection, loudspeakers, a tent and a power generator. With help from other groups such as the recently created Gasteiz hacklab (Kakelbont), Librezale and Indymedia Euskal Herria itself, we handed out pamphlets, held a GNU/Linux *install party*, gave a number of talks on counter-information and free software, ran a workshop on publishing on the Indymedia Euskal Herria website, etc.

This action was important for Metabolik because it required a lot of preparation and coordination between the Metabolik people and it also helped forge links with other groups associated with our hacklab.

MONEY4THEM

ANOTHER OF THE ACTIONS RUN BY METABOLIK WHICH ALSO HAD A CERTAIN SOCIAL IMPACT (and which was well covered in the media), was one organised in front of the Euskalduna Conference Centre in Bilbao. We had heard that a conference was to be held entitled IT4ALL—which paradoxically cost 700 euros for registration. The conference, organised by the Basque Government, was to be attended by representatives of large lobby groups and corporations who wanted to take advantage of the discourse on the socialisation of technology and the technologisation of society just to sell us their products and chain us to their information. Metabolik decided to begin an information counter-campaign, which we called money4them, and we organised a direct telematic action in front of the Euskalduna Centre to demonstrate that there are other ways of doing technology and that this is not the way to bridge the digital gap.

As a result, on 6 February 2003, a group of people from Metabolik and from the Udondo Gaztetxea set up **in front of the Euskalduna Conference Centre** to protest against the background and the structure of the conference. Two people dressed as penguins began handing out pamphlets to participants at the conference as they left the centre, while two laptops connected to the metropolitan free wireless network BilboWireless gave live news of the protest in Indymedia Euskal Herria. As well as the journalists attending the meeting (all, interestingly, from the alternative media), a number of other passers-by came to the stand, which was crowned with a banner with the phrase “**Another technology is possible, connect up freely**” in Spanish and Basque and a loudspeaker.

We received help from other groups, but the most positive thing was perhaps the fact that we managed to react against an event of this scale promulgating values so utterly opposed to our own, and put together an effective counter-action.

WIRELESS SEMINAR

THE TERM *WIRELESS* HAS ALREADY BEEN USED SEVERAL TIMES IN THIS TEXT. THESE NETWORKS OFFER VERY INTERESTING POSSIBILITIES for free exchange of information. Over recent years free

metropolitan wi-fi networks have sprung up in cities around the globe. In the greater Bilbao area there is also an increasing number of people interested in building a network of wireless nodes and for a number of years, collaborators from various municipal areas have been working on preparing new nodes and interconnecting them.

In view of the strategic interest this project held for us and the fact that several of the people from Metabolik were also taking part in **BilboWireless**, we decided to organise seminars on this type of technology in Udondo with the assistance of the *gaztetxe* for the infrastructure, with talks by Metabolik, MadridWireless, Anuestroaire (wireless community of Vitoria-Gasteiz) and BilboWireless itself.

Our aim was to bring together in the one place over a weekend anyone from the area interested in **creating free wireless networks**, to reinforce BilboWireless and assist in the emergence of collaboration agreements and common projects between the different groups. Because this was the first seminar held on the subject anywhere in Spain and we had quite a complete programme of activities (including a workshop on building aeri-als), attendance was very high and we were pleased with the way the project went, although it is true that BilboWireless was not reinforced as much as we would have liked.

X-EVIAN

SOME OF THE MEMBERS OF METABOLIK TOOK PART IN THE COUNTER-SUMMIT IN EVIAN (France) during the G8 meeting in 2003 where they had a chance to see how media centres can be set up in just few days to cover all the news at events of this kind. From a technological point of view, tools are needed for publishing news, editing videos, photos and audio interviews, for live radio or Internet broadcasts, for communicating with other activists by e-mail and chat sessions, etc.

Metabolik was particularly interested in the idea of creating a distribution that would operate in LiveCD mode (just requiring the computer to be booted with the CD inside) and would immediately offer all these tools. We took advantage of an initiative by one of our colleagues who tried creating a **GNU/Linux LiveCD type distribution based on Debian** and we decided to begin a complete project that would operate in English, Spanish and Basque. We later added the possibility of permanently installing the complete operating system on the hard disk, as well as a compilation archive of copyleft material on cyberculture, cyber-rights, hackmeeting chat sessions, etc.

X-Evian has gradually grown and we have distributed it in hacklabs, in hackmeetings, at a large number of seminars and events related to our activities and more recently at the World Social Forum 2005, held in Brazil, where it was very well received.

AND OTHERS

OVER THE LAST FOUR YEARS AND MORE we have carried out—or at least begun—many other projects (mostly smaller ones), although the ones described here are probably the most interesting ones. We'll have to leave a description of Metabolik's involvement in events such as Hackmeetings, Beroketak and A-n-t-e-n-a-k for another day; and also our continuous experimentation with communication technologies (mailing lists, websites, weblogs, wiki, chat, etc.), and other smaller projects in addition to the ones described here, such as the GPL game, the *hacking the streets* session at the town festival in Leioa, the radio programme for Pititako free radio and the electronic workshop.

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