

Intro **The Hacker-Syndrome**
A Feature by Johannes Nichelmann

Stephan *My first own computer was a „C64“ by Commodore. It’s the one, I believe, everybody had then who somehow wanted to play computer games.*

Narrator Stephan Urbach, in his flat in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Stephan is 31 years old.

Stephan *And I just never understood how it works and then I just wanted to know how it works. Why somehow this floppy disk drive was still half a computer. Such things. That’s what I did, yeah, that’s how it started.*

Narrator Stephan is twelve years old then. At 17 he is kicked out of school, has to go to boarding school, passes his Abitur, studies German, drops out, works for a big online corporation. Because that isn’t any fun, he resigns and goes to Berlin. Because of the Pirate Party and the net activists of „Telecomix“.

Telecomix Trailer

Stephan *„Telecomix“ was actually a news agency. „The Telecomix News Agency“. I met them in 2009, when I was working for the pirate party „ACTA“. It was founded to lobby against the European Union’s telecom package, in Sweden. The telecom package. Successful! And then it... .. „Telecomix“ then didn’t stop to do lobbying work. With*

Narrator *A non-commercial chat room.* Stephan starts to work for “Telecomix“.
Then the arab spring begins.

Agent Hi! Who are you?

Mohammad Call me Mohammad. I am 20 years old. From Aleppo.

Agent Hey Mohammad!

Mohammad And you? Are you from Telecomix? Do you have time to talk?

Agent Yes I am! How did you find this Chatroom?

Mohammad A friend told me about it! You are from Europe or America, right?

Agent I am from Germany!

Mohammad What is Telecomix exactly doing?

Agent It’s a great thing. We helped people in Egypt to go online a few weeks ago.

Mohammad Here in Syria we are trying to do something against our President

Libya or in Syria. Like you!

Mohammad Yes, we need a lot of help. Now I have to leave, go to university. Will you be online in three or four hours again?

Agent I think so! See you later!

Mohammad Let's meet in better times!

Train *Good morning to all new passengers on the Intercity-Express to Munich.*

Stephan *(with a Hessian accent) On the Intercity-Express. (laughs)*

Train a *We wish you a pleasant journey. Please notice that because of a diversion due to construction work this train is currently delayed by approximately 9 minutes. We wish you a pleasant journey.*

Stephan We are going to Regensburg now. The Venice of Bavaria. Ehm, or something like that, ehm... What was that? That ehm... the other town. The Florence of Bavaria! Exactly. I like Regensburg. That's where the AK-Vorrat invited me to give a talk. And that's what I'm doing today.

(Arrival at the venue)

small bar, in front of a small stage, a beamer is just being installed for Stephan.

Stephan Hello? Ah, open folder to display file. That's Windows. (Curses and types something).

Ok, Tuuut. Beautiful. Ehm, the presentation should run smoothly.

Young woman Wonderful!

Stephan Well, I have a new computer. That's all gone!

Man True, yes!

Stephan *There was something, wasn't there?*

Man *Yes!*

Narrator A couple of weeks ago Stephan left his laptop on the train because he had a bad cold. For someone like Stephan, who is at home on the net, a severe blow.

Stephan *The great "Tante" just said like: „Just buy a new one!“ And me: „No way!“ And him: „Sure!“ And me: „And with what money?“ And him: „I'll offer you one.“ And me: „You can't even afford that.“ And him: .. True. I'll just ask the internet. “*

Tante *Of course Stephan has a certain standing in the community.*

Stephan *Within five hours 2.300 Euro for this beautiful machine. Was pretty cool.*

Tante *As somebody who lives on the net I was pretty flashed, I mean I was really really impressed by this power that single people can suddenly have.*

Stephan *Okay, the shitstorm afterwards was pretty crap, but that's another story.*

(Just before the talk)

Stephan *That's all still very irritating for me here. I don't know. I'm not sure just now. It's just a... There are people. I mean, real people! Made of flesh and blood and they breathe away your air. That's a problem. I mean, actually I just can't stand people. Their faces are all excited . That's great.*

Man *Does anybody want anything to drink before it starts?*

Stephan *You have time for one more cigarette!*

Mohammad Confused. My sister is getting on my nerves. Her boyfriend is awful and they will marry next month.

Agent What's wrong with him?

Mohammad The question is: What is right with him! Don't know...

Agent Oh my god. Do you want to change their plans of becoming wife and husband?

Mohammad No! It's my sister's decision. I am just her little brother.

Agent I know what you mean! What about you? How was your day?

Mohammad We are very captured by this idea from Egypt. Some friends from university and I - we would like to organize a demonstration against Assad.

Agent Are you and your friends safe? Some other people from Syria told me some horrible stories about your secret service...

Host So, hello everybody! I would like to welcome you! Stephan Urbach is here today with the title „The digital revolution and the arab spring.” And I'm already very curious about the talk. And I wish all of us a lot of fun. And I'm already looking forward to it.

Stephan

We have, when the arab spring started, in Tunisia and before that actually also in Iran, kind of, we just watched everything. Watched the processes. How is it working there just now? What's happening there just now? Which technology is being used? How is it used? Friends of ours were there. We knew them from Telecomix too. We were thrilled by it in front of our screens. And just talked to people there too. That was very exciting. Getting the account just straight „from the ground.“ And also Egypt, when it started in Tahrir Square we watched of course. Then suddenly the net was gone.

Stephan

...invited these people. And they told us then what was happening there just then. And we wrote down those things and distributed them. We were working as a news agency, as it were. We just distributed it quite unfiltered. Then Egypt. Who knows for how many days the net was gone in Egypt? It felt like an eternity. But actually it was only four days! It was only four days. But it felt somehow like ten weeks. In those four days no message from Tahrir Square could be sent to the outside. Who watched the Al Jazeera stream? Then, Tahrir Square?

(Arrival at the old flatshare)

Narrator

The first revolts in Egypt start in late January 2011, when Stephan has only just lived in Berlin for four weeks with Thomas – in a shared room.

(Greetings Thomas' room, with music)

Stephan And here we lived together. In this room.

Thomas Stephan spontaneously needed a place.

Stephan Yes, back then...

Author Where did you come from then?

Stephan From... from... hm... at the time from Hanau.

Thomas I just heard about it, read it on Twitter, that it was all about the first
one or two weeks until you found something. And thought okay.
Stephan has a new job here and knows people in Berlin and bla. Then
it won't be that difficult. Yeah, as if.

Narrator Until then the two only knew each other from a party weekend, had
had a short conversation. Thomas' flatmate Sophie is still astonished.

Author Can you still remember when Stephan turned up here?

Sophie I can still remember my first, ehm... when I was first informed about
it. I was actually staying with my parents in Rostock for New Year's
and got a call from Thomas and he said "By the way, Mr. Urbach is
living here now!" (Stephan laughs) And I thought: Who is Mr.

Stephan Ehm... of course! I paid for the month when Thomas wasn't here.

Sophie Yes, but not for the other ones.

Stephan Hmm... what?

Sophie But not otherwise, right?

Stephan I paid Thomas in beer.

Sophie Yes, yes. Exactly. Somehow that was weird and not very transparent, by the way! But I didn't mind and we both sit in front of our laptop anyway. We also don't talk that much. (laughs) And a very particular world was created in this room. From which I tried to keep away as much as possible.

Stephan Ah, unfortunately this Powerpoint is busted. No, a slide is missing. Well, ok. Then without the slide. Then I'll just tell you. Ehm, then there were those four dark days, when there just wasn't any net and in a few couple of hours we thought "hmm... that's a bit bad." Because the Al Jazeera livestream is actually only a compilation of two hours that is repeated. And then we put up the first modem dial-up server in Sweden as quickly as possible. Who of you still has a modem?
(audience laughs) Who of you ever had a modem? (audience laughs)

because the commands for the military also passed through there. For the police and such. They didn't separate that into a government and a civilian network.

Stephan *Then suddenly the net was gone because Mubarak had gone off the rails and had had the net switched off. Actually first the mobile phone network, then the internet. And we then reacted pretty quickly and then made modem dial-up servers in Europe and in America. Because the phone lines were still working. And yes, then the Egyptians via a modem could log onto the internet. And that's how we became hands-on activists. That was never planned. That had never been the intention. We just stumbled into it. We basically just got pulled into it.*

(flatshare, without music)

Stephan *We were drinking „Sterni“ most of the time.*

Thomas *Yes!*

Stephan *Actually I was sitting on this sofa. Thomas there on the chair. But on a different one. On that kind, I think.*

Thomas *Yes exactly, that was still standing in front there.*

Stephan *And then we would always eat in the evening and stare at our computers. And ehm...*

Thomas Or also with others. Or actually talked.

Stephan And that's when the situation in Egypt actually escalated.

Thomas There was rubbish everywhere and Stephan in the middle of it. Either sitting here in front of his computer, staring at the computer. Often with his headset on, talking. Or typing frantically. Completely spellbound and he somehow still managed an automated „hello“. But it wasn't much more at the moment again either. Or he'd pace up and down through the room, running around frantically with the phone at his ear, or the headset on and talked and explained and spoke and told. Which was quite exciting because when he was just talking then usually two sentences would be enough for me to know what the current status of the situation was. To know, yeah okay, all clear! Let's go! Yeah and one to two hours later, while we were just working and talking and I was still getting the information I still needed, or Stephan gave them to me and said: „Okay, you could do this and that.“ – what do I know... be it looking up fax numbers or... that was nice stuff, yes. Fax numbers for... for...

Stephan For I believe ten, fifteen people over several hours. I had a long list and was sitting there and faxing. (audience laughs) Was drinking a lot of beer in the process and was sending faxes. (audience laughs) The same over and over again. There were also dead numbers among them, that's okay, but later we had gone through a quite big number and suddenly it started. The cables were glowing up. On the fax it just

beautiful to see how the IP addresses came back, I mean you can just...

(Mubarak's speech – over it:)

Narrator Stephan and the other Telecomix activists are present via their screens when Egypt's vice-president Suleiman announces Mubarak's resignation on February 11th, 2011. But the arab spring continues.

Stephan When did it start in Syria? Does anybody know? March of last year. Since March of last year the people fight for their freedom in Syria. And we also checked it out. What's going on there?

Stephan *And then it started in Syria. And that was the crassest, what we had seen here until now. By now I don't know anymore which side is right or who is responsible for the whole thing. It has just turned into a covered civil war. We called attention to the fact that it's western technology that's there. That it's the west who ultimately helped the regime with hardware shipments to set it up like this.*

Stephan And we also checked it out. What's going on there? And found: "Blue Coat"! It's actually meant for corporate networks. You can just beautifully see every single page view, completely see each http-request and you can set alarms. When a certain word is contained in an URL, alert the secret service. And notify them which IP it is and where this IP is logged in right now. That's what they did. They snatched people because they were on Facebook. Okay, you can crack

somehwere the secret service knocking on their door. We found means and ways that I can't explain because they are still in use and it would be pretty dumb now to talk about it, how we do it exactly, but it works!. And in such a way that every time someone uses a computer somewhere... we have to build an individual solution each time. So that means, for every Telecomix-agent there can somehow only be a maximum of two people who right now in Syria are doing things and who can feel reasonably safe doing them.

Mohammad Hey!

Agent Hey Mohammad! What's up? Didn't see you for a long time.

Mohammad I know! Today, demonstration at university. Assad must step down! A lot of people are against him. But yesterday they killed one of my friends. I am very very sad.

Agent I am sorry. Are you sure he is dead?

Mohammad I am. They killed a lot of people. I have to be very careful.

Stephan *And we had a room called „Obsyria“. I mean, the rooms have names. And in fact there is always a hash sign followed by the room name. and this one was called Obsyria. So I have the IRC in the terminal, the old fashioned way. So that's what it roughly looks like. There's a*

and somehow just said he needed someone to talk to. I said yes. I am here now. Don't have anything to do right now anyway. Then he said: yes, but not openly now. But rather in private. And then we had a long conversation. He shared a lot about himself. He actually only wanted to talk about his sister's relationship drama. That's what we were mainly talking about. I mean, during the first conversation. We had a lot of these conversations. I always thought that they were very intimate. I mean these direct dialogs can become very intimate. That's how we formed a friendship. It became political quite quickly, that's also how... He has organized a lot in Aleppo. Demonstrations, distributing flyers. Leaflets. Networking meetings with other activist groups. I mean that guy really did a whole lot there. Was already at least in the beginning one of the key figures in Aleppo. Yes, I could verify that. Because of people who on other channels...

(mobile phone vibrates)

Were talking about him.

Stephan

At one point there was this idea... I mean, they wanted to have this "day of anger". Quite in the beginning. And then 600 or 300 students, I don't remember exactly anymore, gathered at the university. And there was just one guy from the secret service. They all went home because they were afraid. Of one person.

Stephan

On this „day of anger“ students gathered, I can speak now again especially of Aleppo. There was one guy from the secret service. A single one. 700 students went home and on their way they were shot

computer name with it in the metadata. Check it out on your own videos when you upload them or switch on the metadata. What's all in there! But just try switching that off on your cameras! Try finding the menu item if you don't have an instruction manual! Almost impossible. Because of course, why would you want to switch that off? I mean, if you just live here in Europe or in the States or in Canada. There's just no reason to switch that off, that's just great. Yes, unfortunately for three quarters of the world it is completely reasonable to sometimes switch off stuff. Yes, in any case we had these videos and it took us a long time to write scripts to clear those videos from this data.

Stephan We were technical service providers for them, ultimately counsellors. We were listening to their hopes, concerns and hardships. We were basically the contact they could talk to freely and openly.

Narrator Until today Stephan sees the videos on ARD, BBC or CNN. For a newspaper he interviews Mohammad.

Stephan Question: What's happening there right now?

Narrator What's happening there right now?

Mohammad Crimes against humanity. Genocide. People are eating crisps for breakfast because the shops are closed. We have proof that they torture people. Then some die. The gangs who rule the country can kill anybody. Children, women, men. And they try to kill our heroes

Narrator How is the Syrian government censoring the internet?

Mohammad We have sources who tell us that Iranian experts help the regime to spy out the net. The government and the secret services take advantage of the current situation to find out how they can control our words and hopes. When they snatch an activist they try to find out his or her password under torture. Especially for Facebook. That's how they can identify his friends who support the revolution.

Stephan How was „Telecomix“ helping you?

Mohammad The „Telecomix“ team helped us emotionally and practically. They told us how we could move safely on the internet. What's possible and what isn't. And they helped us to distribute our message. It is public knowledge that the Syrian government blocks many websites like Youtube so that we can't upload videos there for the world to see what's really happening. For me they are like a family. You feel the intimate atmosphere. They are always there to support us. These people have a high degree of humanity and responsibility in them.

Stephan *That was so: Wooow! Because that's totally crass to read something like that. And now, I somehow really cried. What do you think of „Telecomix“?*

Narrator What do you think of Telecomix?

politics, not economics or religion. We have to tear down these walls!

We have to establish freedom, justice and equality for all.

„Telecomix“ give me a little hope that we are on the right track. If I am still alive after the victory of the revolution, I will have a lot to tell as a writer. It is my greatest dream to become a writer. I have a lot of great memories from this time and „Telecomix“ is one of them.

Stephan *That's actually just totally crass. I mean from someone who is more or less just being shot at, to read something like that is totally crass. I mean, really.*

(Telecomix video sound)

Stephan To then hear again from nerds. That's fabricated! That's faked. Ehm... absolutely totally and preferably on the net. They only believe studies and stuff that they have seen on the news. Or also some who discuss to death: "Yes, maybe it's also the rebels who are the aggressors and Assad only defends himself?" This admission of crude theories! And this admission of crude theories has worn down a lot of activists! That they just weren't up for it anymore. This discussing to death of facts! I mean, of alleged facts... has brought people to not help anymore. Which presumably also cost many human lives. Our whole nerd arrogance that we have so wonderfully cultivated over the last thirty years, which is also a lot of fun, also for me back then. Yes, this "I can help build the net, shape it... that's a real hazard."

completely stupid, was it?

Young woman No! It was great and fluffy and stuff. You did great!

Stephan *Thank you!*

(music)

Stephan *And naturally that gives your ego a crass push! And you have to be able to handle that and that's not easy. And if on top of that you are in an environment that first of all especially perceives you as a hero. Or primarily... Early on I always felt like Bastian Balthasar Bux from „The Neverending Story“. The protagonist, the little fat boy, who prefers reading books to going outside and who then and there discovers what is heroic about himself. In Phantasia. And who starts an incredible lot and doesn't finish anything in this book. And I'm the same. I start an incredible lot and hardly ever finish anything. And I believe most of us are all searching for the thing that's it for them. And I believe also most of us dream of at one point somehow being a hero and having a statue stand somewhere.*

Author When have you felt like a superstar?

Stephan I mean, it also took me a long time to understand what was actually happening to me. On one side there was the outside world, saying: cool stuff! And the isolation at the same time, where you get carried

heros.

Stephan And eventually he just didn't come back. And then shortly afterwards we got this video from a torture chamber of the secret service, which we put online.

Author With him?

Stephan (whispers) Yes. I mean, I knew what he looks like. And then we got the videos and we automatically removed the metadata and pixelated and cut stuff. Worked completely automatically and for a start actually didn't think about what was exactly happening. And only later that became somehow clear. And now come quotes from Mohammad:
„Please tell the people of the world, to not forget the blood of the innocent children who died as martyrs.

Mohammad And also not the parents' tears. Don't forget the friends' tears. Please don't forget any of it. Innocent people. We are brothers and sisters. Humans. I am not saying this to any government, I am saying it to ordinary people, because I only believe in them. The governments of the world drop us. That is disappointing. Maybe that will change one day.

Stephan But we hope that this will change soon. Yes. (lights a cigarette)
Ultimately we just couldn't fulfill the hope, isn't it. I mean, we couldn't fulfill the fire of hope that we had raised in this person. But it

(Telecomix jingle)

Narrator For nine months Stephan Urbach has fought from his computer for the arab revolution. Together with other “Telecomix” activists he has made it possible that some people in Egypt have access to the net in spite of the internet blockade. He provided members of the Syrian opposition with the possible know-how to establish online connections. He has found friends who are dead now. A shock for him.

Stephan There was a chatroom where all of them were and there was just silence. There just wasn't anybody anymore. There just wasn't anybody left. And at some point I was sitting there, in front of my computer, and thought, what do you do now? Do I continue them? Should I continue them? Or do I switch them off? And at some point I just switched off this server to free the resources for something else, but it was... in that moment they were actually really dead. That's just when they were also... That's when the last little spark I still had of them was just gone. When you actually switch it off, then they are really gone. I mean, we don't say good bye in the moment when the person dies anymore but in the moment when the user is gone. Yeah. (lights a cigarette) But that's also something for which we weren't prepared. Just absolutely not. That there is this intense connection with people. I don't make a difference between knowing someone online or offline. That's rubbish. That's ehm... many people still do that when they are talking about reallife. That's just as real. That's not fake or virtual. These are real people on the other end of the line. And

Stephan

You have to imagine, I was somehow only sitting in front of the computer. Only functioned and through the hero worship that people showed us, which I already mentioned, you get into this pressure to accomplish more and more. Which doesn't work. Not without damage. On top of that seeing more and more terrible images. How people die, how they are tortured. Pictures of makeshift hospitals in sewers. Dead people, dead children, missile impacts. People being hit by snipers in the streets. And you have no time to process it. Then your friends die and you can't mourn them because you don't have any time for it.

It looks like you have given up your own life and only live a strange life, namely that of this machine which does these things. Don't fulfill own needs. Not at all anymore. Don't talk about it with anyone. Because you are the hero and the hero doesn't have problems. And all of that has just lead in this feedback loop to a totally crass depression.

(Wiping nose, lighting cigarette, smoking)

I always describe it, if someone asks, what emptiness feels like ... in „The Neverending Story“ by Michael Ende the „Nothing“ is described. It isn't grey, it isn't white, it isn't black. It's simply only „nothing“. And this „nothing“ devours dreams.

(flatshare, open window)

have also happened if he had continued to live here, or not? I suppose yes. I don't know. Any speculation is useless. I felt a little guilty. I mean, I didn't encourage any of it, or did anything else, but exactly that, what happens in many circles... didn't I pay enough attention? And let myself get carried away by the enthusiasm and the intensity with which Stephan approached the whole thing? I completely understand the great difficulty that people in those circles then don't pay enough attention to their own needs and limits. And I as a friend also didn't pay attention to my friend's limits.

Stephan

In my case that went so far, that I didn't want to exist in this „nothingness“ anymore. I mean, I didn't want to be anymore and also had plans to end it all. In fact the hard way. But that didn't happen. Because... there was a hacker who killed himself after 15 years of depression. After a 15 year fight against depression he killed himself. And I didn't want that people stand there and cry for me. I didn't want that anymore in that moment. That's when it became clear to me, that there are reasons to simply take your life in your own hands and to change that. I went looking for help, from a trauma psychologist. And yes, now it's okay.

Narrator

Stephan isn't the only Tecomix agent whose forces were spent. He broaches the issue of depression on the scene after it was almost too late for him.

Stephan

That was in the “Chaos-Communication-Camp“. That's a hacker-event, every four years. The big camp. Three thousand five hundred

That's what we did then. And then we showed a video which I still think is one of our best. Where our leader Cameron, who is basically only an AI, an artificial intelligence, commands us to switch off Telecomix to think about what we are really doing. The video was great.

(types something on computer)

T-e-l-e-c-o-m-i-x ... shut down. Go on...

(music starts)

„Cameron“

Hello, this is Cameron from Telecomix. This is a message to all internals and a public message to the internet works. That telecomix system is going down for a reboot for an unknown amount of time. I have commanded the operators of the Telecomix system to shut it down! Upgrade it to the next level and then bring it back online. For the next moves do not worry. You will not get lost. I am Cameron. I will be found. You are from the internets. You come in peace. Let there be freedom for all people and computers.

Stephan

And it was totally crass when there was suddenly silence.

(opens a bottle, drinks, breathes out heavily)

(church, street, footsteps in the snow - Chemnitz)

(x86 unknown). Two operator(s) online, 27 channels formed. Highest connection count: 60.

Stephan

I mean, it became clear to me in Regensburg during the presentation, how naive it all was what we did. It was so...I am talking and talking and talking and suddenly I was kind of: I could only think. What have we actually been doing there? How naive were we actually to just think we could do this like that?

Narrator

The Hacker-Syndrome

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