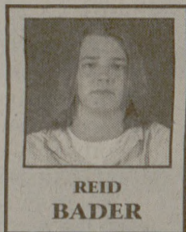


An even trade?

Vote-swapping Websites could affect election; authorities should back off

The newest wave in American Internet culture is vote-swapping. Like most new elements of society, it is under legal fire, specifically from the state of California.



REID BADER

Vote-swapping is legal under federal law and should not be prohibited by any state's legal proceedings.

It should be viewed as an agreement between citizens to achieve their goals.

Vote-swapping concerns the left side of the political model. Supporters of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader in toss up states sign up to vote for the Democratic Party candidate Al Gore.

Their votes are swapped for Nader votes in states either solidly behind Gore or Republican Party candidate George W. Bush.

This could help Nader toward his goal of 5 percent of the popular vote, the threshold needed for the Green Party to obtain federal matching funds for the 2004 presidential election.

Nadertrader.com encourages swappers to "Think locally. Vote nationally."

However, the state of California does not see the vote-swapping phenomenon this way.

On Oct. 30, Voteswap2000.com was closed by California Secretary of State Bill Jones.

The letter from Jones' office stated, "The right to free and fair elections is a cornerstone of American democracy."

"Any person or entity that tries to exchange votes or brokers the exchange of votes will be pursued with the utmost vigor."

The basis of closing the site is a California election law that says inducing a person to vote a partic-

ular way is illegal.

American University law professor Jamie Raskin, whose commentary in the Oct. 24 edition of Slate popularized the idea, has also implied that Jones' motivation for closing the site has Republican roots.

The creators of the Voteswap2000.com site have said they will not relaunch the Website, even if political pressure is eased.

However, numerous other sites,

such as Nadertrader.com, continue operation.

A Justice Department spokesperson, Chris Watney, said, "In general, it's a crime to promise voters anything of value if they vote a certain way. So this system, where no money is exchanged, is OK."

Last Thursday, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit against California Secretary of State Bill Jones.

The ACLU accuses Jones of creating a climate of fear to inhibit free speech by accusing Websites that promote interstate "vote-swapping" of criminal activity that "corrupts the election process."

The suit is on behalf of another Californian vote-swapping Website, Voteexchange2000.com, that shut down for fear of legal action after the Voteswap2000.com shutdown.

Despite the situation in California, vote-swapping sites have flourished in their two-week existence. Nadertrader.com reported more than 119,437 hits on Oct. 31.

The site Winchell.com states that almost 5,000 people have signed up to swap votes on its Website.

Thanks to the Electoral College, these small amounts of people swapping votes could make a big difference in the long run.

In 1960 and 1976, just 12,000 and 9,000 votes, respectively, could have changed who was elected president.

In this regard, the state of California should change its electoral rules to mimic federal electoral laws that do not consider it a crime to swap votes.

The movement of trading votes boasts a registered number of users who could, in theory, swing this election.

However, like most political campaigns the end result of tactics, such as vote-swapping, can never be precisely measured and thus, their impact cannot be totally understood.

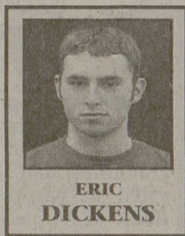
In light of this, California should back off of vote-swapping sites and their users.

Reid Bader is a junior political science major.

HACKER, SCHMACKER

Actions promote improved network security

With the recent breach of Microsoft's network and the possible seizure of valuable source codes of Microsoft programs, the activities of hackers have been brought back into the media spotlight. Hackers have been a hot topic over the past few months as several major Websites like CNET and Yahoo were temporarily shutdown when their servers were overloaded, producing a "denial of service."



ERIC DICKENS

In truth, throughout the history of personal computers (which were invented by hackers), the term "hacker" has been viewed negatively in public opinion. Hackers have been seen as malicious self-assured parasites engaging in criminal activity. While this is a fair description of some hackers, it overlooks the benefit to the digital world.

As society continues to become more dependent on computers and an increasing number of people put their faith in network security, it is necessary to clear up some misconceptions about hackers.

First off, it is important to note that most people involved in the so-called "computer underground" make a very sharp distinction between the terms "hacker" and "cracker."

In his book Maximum Security: A Hacker's Guide to Protecting Your Internet Site and Network, Mark Taber outlines the difference between the two types of people. Taber writes that hackers are people who are "intensely interested in the ... workings of any computer operating system" and who constantly explore data systems for weak points, gaining knowledge in the process.

A cracker, on the other hand, is "a person who breaks into or otherwise violates the system integrity of remote machines, with malicious intent." While this may seem empty rhetoric put out by the accused to arbitrarily separate themselves from the true criminals, it is an important distinction most people do not make.

For the most part, hackers (used in the broad sense) are not out to steal Microsoft's source code for profit or shut down Yahoo, causing stockholders to lose thousands of dollars by the minute.

Anybody who, as a kid, took apart Transformers figures or even Dad's electric drill knows the thrill of discovery. Learning how things work, be it a 7-inch figure of Megatron or a complex, multi-hubbed T3-routed computer network, is what makes most hackers tick. Crackers are out to break the world; hackers just want to know how it works.

As society continues to become more dependent on computers and an increasing number of people put their faith in network security, it is necessary to clear up some misconceptions about hackers.

Another major misconception is the motivation people have for breaking into computer networks.

The reward for most hackers is not embarrassing sites like Yahoo and making them lose revenue, but rather the accomplishment of knowing that they were able to find a loophole in a network's security and beat the best efforts of highly paid company programmers.

Viewed in that context, hackers usually do not consider their activities illegal, even though those actions, in legal terms and precedents, are. In hackers' opinion, the crime is not that they broke into a network, but rather that they were able to break into it in the first place.

CNN recently held an email interview with the editor of 2600, a hacker Website and quarterly magazine. The editor, who goes by the alias Emmanuel Goldstein, described hackers as having an "idealistic naiveté." Rather than malevolence, the idealistic notion that every last network should be completely impenetrable drives a hacker to find out if one really is.

In his emails to CNN, Goldstein used the example of cracking online privacy to support this kinder view of hackers' motivation. He wrote "It's interesting that hackers are the ones who are always pushing strong encryption" and "if we were truly interested in getting into everyone's personal affairs, it's unlikely we'd try and show them how to stay secure."

A dam without a river behind it will show no cracks. Then, when the water does flow, all its weak points become apparent.

The crackers who broke into Microsoft and conducted the "denial of service" attacks should be prosecuted. Their actions go beyond curiosity and cross into criminality.

However, the world needs hackers. As data transmissions evolve from pictures of the grandkids to more valuable information like credit card numbers, the need for networks to be tested by people outside of the networks increases. A digital society cannot rely on those who built a network to find all its loopholes.

The future of hackers and established Websites could be prosperous for both. As one anonymous hacker put it in an interview with ZDTV, the two sides need to communicate with each other. Hackers run their own Websites and hold conventions that are rarely attended by non-hackers.

As record companies have found out in their legal battle against online piracy, it is better to embrace new technology than destroy it. If online companies, while prosecuting crackers, also learn what they can from the action of hackers, they, and society as a whole, will continue to see benefits.

Eric Dickens is a senior English major.

Student Senate passage of Bonfire Resolution meaningless, hypocritical

In response to Chad Wagner's Nov. 3 Mail Call. After the Bonfire Resolution was passed, I had a member of the Student Senate come up to me and ask, "You mean there are people who do not agree with Bowen?"

He asked the question with all sincerity — he simply did not know that there were people who wanted to have a Bonfire this very year.

It leaves me wondering how it can be that a senator, a representative of the student body, simply did not know about opposition to Bowen.

I hope this was only one person, but I fear that it was not.

I do not believe that the percentage of people against the resolution was only 17.4 percent.

I also do not believe that the sources of information on campus painted an accurate picture of the Bonfire situation, including Bowen's plan and the other options.

The spread of anti-Keep The Fire Burning (KTFB) half-truths is only one example of this

perhaps unintentional propaganda campaign. In my experience, when explained based on facts, KTFB looked like a very good idea to most students.

Finally, I find it laughable that the Student Senate and other organizations call for unity among the Aggies when they themselves are passing the motions causing the rifts.

They start the arguments and then blame others for continuing them.

Considering the controversy that it possibly knew would come about — at least, it should have known if they had listened to their constituency — the Student Senate should have taken a hands-off approach to the whole issue.

What good did it do to pass this resolution? Absolutely none.

It only ended up casting various groups, including the Student Senate, into bad light.

In my opinion, the Bonfire Resolution was a meaningless move that only broadened divisions and initiated a slew of mudslinging.

It was a bad move for the Student Senate and definitely hints at a lack of knowledge of the wishes of the students of Texas A&M.

Chris Carlin
Class of '03

Unregulated display of pornography in campus dormitories disturbing

Pornography is easily accessed through the University's computer network.

Evidently, there is no filter in place.

Porn parties are held in dorm rooms. Doors are left open, allowing passersby to hear the audio, and on-screen views are easily seen from the hallway.

Some perverts even put the computer speakers in the doorway so the sounds can clearly be heard up and down the hall.

I would like to know what the University's policy is by allowing porn to be carried on its system.

Illegal material should be filtered. I request that someone in authority take a careful review of this matter.

What is the University's policy if the porn is purchased as a videotape or CD and is played in the dorm room?

I was told there are smoking and alcohol regulation of the dorms.

What rule prohibits pornography and how is that rule enforced?

Carrilyn Baker
Wichita Falls

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 300 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number.

The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style, and accuracy.

Letters may be submitted in person at 014 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters may also be mailed to:

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College Station, Texas
77843

Campus Mail: 1111
Fax: (979) 845-2647
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MIKE LUCKOVICH
ATLANTA CONSTITUTION 2/2000

Al or Dubya ...
Maybe Ralph or Pat ...
Could care less ...
Have your voice heard.

In conjunction with tomorrow's general election, The Battalion invites the Texas A&M student body to share its views on the race for president.

Students are urged to submit letters to the editor outlining who they are voting for and for what reasons.

In this case, letters must be 200 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number. The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style and accuracy.

Considering length constraints, it is recommended that the author focus his or her letter on one or two primary campaign issues.