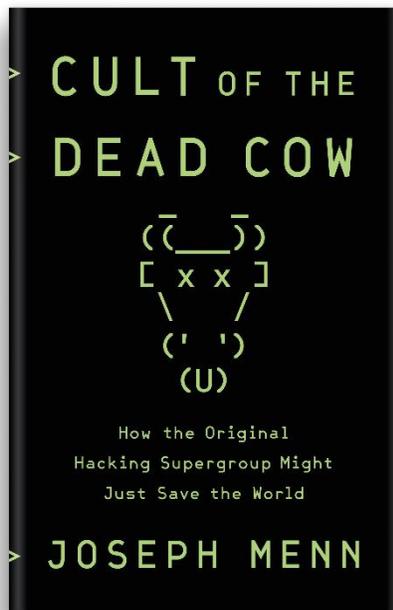**The shocking untold story of the elite secret society of hackers fighting to protect our privacy, our freedom – even democracy itself.**

CULT OF THE DEAD COW

How the Original Hacking Supergroup Might Just Save the World

By Joseph Menn

While other books have tackled the military-internet complex, tech-enabled intelligence gathering, and cyberwarfare, together with WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and the 2016 US election, there is a crucial element to the stories missing in all of them. In his revelatory new book, **CULT OF THE DEAD COW: How the Original Hacking Supergroup Might Just Save the World,** acclaimed journalist Joseph Menn profiles the people dedicated to information security who are out of the spotlight and in the shadows, fighting to protect our personal data and freedom as well as our national security.

CULT OF THE DEAD COW is the story of the oldest surviving, most respected, and most famous hacking group of all time. Its members released tools that forced giant companies to work harder to protect consumers, and then they launched the broad movement known as hacktivism.

Though it has never had more than twenty active members at a time, the Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc) has multiple claims on history. As it evolved from a pre-web community, cDc members developed hacking software that is still being used by criminals, spies, and professional network administrators. They released the top tool for testing password security and created what was for years the best technique for controlling computers from afar. They contributed to the development of Tor, the most important privacy tool on the net, and helped build cyberweapons that advanced US security without injuring anyone. The Cult of the Dead Cow defined hacktivism and tirelessly promoted the idea to the public and fellow hackers, leading the movement and urging programmers to wield their keyboards in service of human rights. As cDc matured, its members became leaders in changing hacking from a hobby to a profession to a mode of warfare.

Though most Cult of the Dead Cow members have remained anonymous through the years, sixteen have agreed to be named for the first time in these pages, including all the previously

cloaked core participants, many of whom are available for interviews to discuss **CULT OF THE DEAD COW**. With its origins in the earliest days of the Internet, the cDc is full of powerful characters—spies, activists, musicians, and politicians—some of whom are now woven into the top ranks of the American establishment.

A few members have become not only public but famous over the years. cDc figures and those they trained have advised US presidents, cabinet members, and the chief executives of Google, Apple, and Facebook. As revealed here, the most famous is former Texas Congressman and current presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke, whose time in the cDc led him to found a tech business, launch an alternative publication in El Paso, and embark on unconventional campaigns.

As issues of tech security become matters of public safety, national security, and ultimately the future of democracy, the Cult of the Dead Cow's influence figures in critical decisions and national dialogue, even if many are unaware of it. Serious hacking requires critical thinking, and the cDc members continued to engage in it as the battlefield expanded from exposing flawed software programs to taking on the broader industry and social issues. At a time when a shortage of critical thinking has wreaked dire consequences, the cDc story is an


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   '..and none but the Bovine survived the onslaught'

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antidote. Today, this small group and their followers represent the best hope for making technology a force for good instead of for surveillance and oppression.

CULT OF THE DEAD COW shows a way forward, both for those involved in privacy, security, and internet regulation as well as those within the broader technological world as ethical debates make daily international headlines. **CULT OF THE DEAD COW** shows how governments, corporations, and criminals came to hold immense power over individuals and how to fight back against them.

Revelations from
CULT OF THE DEAD COW

> **The small membership of the Cult of the Dead Cow included, in its earliest years, Beto O'Rourke.** He hacked phone service as a teen in order to connect to bulletin boards, the precursor of the Web and what O'Rourke calls "the Facebook of its day." CULT OF THE DEAD COW explains how O'Rourke built on that sense of community, appreciation for innovation, and guerrilla style of communication to launch a technology company and an alternative publication that served as a springboard for his entry into politics.

> **15 of the other core members of the Cult of the Dead Cow are named in print for the first time in this book.** They joined a remarkably diverse group for the early hacking scene, including a young woman brought in by O'Rourke, a future Long Island prosecutor, contractors for U.S. intelligence agencies, and the founder of one of the most innovative companies improving software security, Veracode.

> **One of the previously known core members is Peiter "Mudge" Zatko.** He went on to advise

President Bill Clinton and Democratic Sen. Mark Warner and lead grantmaking on offensive and defensive cyber capabilities at DARPA, the Pentagon skunkworks that created the internet. Other Cult of the Dead Cow members launched the modern hacking conference, influenced the development of Tor, and for a time worked with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

> The FBI investigated the group for years after it released tools that let average computer users hijack machines running Windows, but it ultimately closed the case without charges.

> The father of the hacktivism movement, Cult member Oxblood Ruffin, was surprisingly close to Western intelligence agencies that shared his distaste for the Chinese government. As other groups and individuals have claimed the mantle of hacktivism since, multiple countries have carried out political hacks disguised as moral actions, likely including some celebrated breaches of spyware vendors serving Western governments.

> In their pursuit of media attention for fun and for causes, the Cult of the Dead Cow had an uneven relationship with the truth. One of their most famous stories, that of a collaboration with Chinese dissidents called the Hong Kong Blondes, was at least in large part fiction, internal emails show. The adventures of this group were reported as fact in publications including Wired and the *Los Angeles Times*, but the tale set off a chain of events that brought Oxblood and other technologists close to the orbit of the Dalai Lama, where they would play critical roles in defending Tibetans from Chinese spying and exposing that country's massive overseas espionage.

> Oxblood Ruffin directly inspired the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, the paragon for academics working with technologists and other experts to expose governments spying on their own people.

> After formative years in the cDc-inspired culture of media hacks, members of a cDc offshoot spread racially divisive memes during the 2016 election and promoted exiled neo-Nazi hacker Andrew Auernheimer, who has kept the Daily Stormer and other hate-filled publications alive.

> The fate of Texan Jesse Dryden, the founder of the pioneering hacking conference series HoHoCon and the son of the drummer for Sixties fusion band Jefferson Airplane, is undetermined. Dryden was a master social engineer who hasn't been seen by his oldest friends for years, and they are unsure if he disappeared by choice or if he is no longer living.

> Mudge's innovative security boutique @Stake trained many of today's top defenders, including Alex Stamos, the Facebook chief security officer who exposed Russian interference on the world's most important social network.

About the Author

An investigative reporter for Reuters, **Joseph Menn** is one of the longest serving and most respected mainstream journalists on cyber security. He has won three Best in Business awards from the Society of American Business Editors & Writers and been a finalist for three Gerald Loeb Awards.

His previous book *Fatal System Error: The Hunt for the New Crime Lords who are Bringing Down the Internet* exposed the Russian government's collaboration with organized criminal hackers and was named one of the 10 best nonfiction books of 2010 by Hudson Booksellers. It was placed on the official reading list of the US Strategic Command and was compared by the *New Yorker* to the novels of Stieg Larsson. He also wrote the definitive *All the Rave: The Rise and Fall of Shawn Fanning's Napster*, an Investigative Reports & Editors Inc. finalist for book of the year.

He previously worked for The *Financial Times, Los Angeles Times* and *Bloomberg* and has been interviewed on NPR, PBS, BBC, Fox Business, MSNBC, and many more. In addition, Menn has spoken at conferences including Def Con, Black Hat and RSA. He grew up near Boston and lives in San Francisco.

Advance Praise for CULT OF THE DEAD COW

"The author narrates a fast-paced story about how a little-known movement that could trace its roots to the psychedelic rock of the 1960s—one visionary was the son of the Jefferson Airplane's drummer, while another was a lyricist for the Grateful Dead—would eventually serve as security advisory for the Pentagon, the cybernetics industry, and geopolitical forces around the globe… A quick tale of black hats and white hats, with a lot of gray area in between." – *Kirkus Reviews*

"Menn's work serves as a spirited examination of the art of hacking and how it might be used for good." – *Publishers Weekly*

"Long before there was a multi-billion dollar cyber industry, there were some ethical hackers who showed us that the Silicon Valley emperors had no clothes. They looked like misfits, but they showed us how insecure the Internet was and how to make it better. Joe Menn makes this previously untold story entertaining and relevant to today's cyber threats." – Richard A. Clarke, first White House "Cyber Czar"

"*Cult of the Dead Cow* is an exhilarating and essential look into a part of the hacker underground that has shaped the modern world in profound ways. Readers will be amazed by this crew of eccentric, impassioned geniuses who have so often served as the Internet's conscience while lurking unknown in the shadows. The depth of Joe Menn's reporting is as astonishing as his storytelling - no one could have captured this tale better." – Ashlee Vance, author of *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*

"*Cult of the Dead Cow* reveals a story few know about the origins of white hat hacking and the heroes it celebrates. Despite the title, hacking isn't dead yet!" – Vint Cerf, co-inventor of the Internet

"This dramatic story of how the Internet's first hackers learned to handle their outsized abilities can help us grapple to control the power of today's technology titans." – Bruce Schneier, Harvard fellow and lecturer and author of *Click Here to Kill Somebody*