

## **“Jugend Hackt” and the value in code**

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Somehow by definition my role as a participant observer at [Open Knowledge Foundation Germany](#) includes a fair amount of participation besides some observation. For the last couple of weeks I therefore helped to organize the OKF’s project “[Jugend hackt](#)” (roughly: “Young coders”), a weekend-long hackathon for young people between 12 and 18 years.

### **120 young coders, 25 mentors & 27 projects**

This year Jugend hackt took place for the second time and again was organized in a loose cooperation with the British [Young Rewired State](#), which is running these kind of hack-camps since 2008. Within Germany Jugend hackt is unique in its kind – probably one of the explanations for the fact that with 120 participants the event pretty much doubled its figures. The event took place at a spacious public youth centre right in the middle of Berlin. On Friday afternoon the young coders gathered at the venue and started to mingle over a bottle of [Club-Mate](#) or two. This first evening was used to develop rough ideas for civic technology projects around the five broad themes: society, surveillance, health, environment and leisure time activities. At 20.30, a special guest entered the stage and sat down for what might be called a ‘fireside-chat’ somewhere else: Frank Rieger, spokesperson of the Chaos Computer Club (CCC), visited the young coders and shared his and the CCC’s idea of hacker ethics, which is modeled after Steven Levy’s book “[Hackers](#)” and the ideas of MIT’s Tech Model Railroad Club.

After some hours of sleep in the nearby hostel, Saturday’s motto was plain and simple: code, code, code. The participants started in project teams they had formed over the course of Friday evening and started working. As organizational, moral and technical support, around 25 volunteers – the “mentors”, all experienced coders – supported the participants when help was needed. Sunday morning then, the rooms were buzzing with last-minute fixes and at 11.30, the stage was set for the final presentations. Within less than two days the 120 participants managed to form 27 project groups – which were all able to present their work in a 3-minute pitch live on stage. Not only from my rather lay point of view [the results were one thing: simply impressive](#). In the end the jury claimed five winners – however you could easily get the impression that this titles just played a minor role amongst the young coders as they were way to engaged with the new friendships they established during this exciting weekend amongst like-minded young people.

### **The societal bottom-line: Value-in-code**

Lawrence Lessig’s book “[Code and other laws of cyberspace](#)” taught me a central lesson: Like the legislative “west coast code” produced in Washington, the technical “east coast code” (presumably produced in Silicon Valley) is a regulating force within society and therefore can never be neutral. There is a value in code.



Frank Rieger and Participants // CC BY 3.0 by Leonard Wolf

In their later lives as “grown ups” a fair share of today’s pupils will move into maybe law, politics or business. There, as well as in many other disciplines, they will have the chance to embed their inherent values into their work. And they will not miss that chance. Conservative politicians will push for conservative campaigns. Neoliberal managers will maximize nothing but the shareholders profit and green lawyers will maybe decide to interpret the narcotics act in a broader way than other would do. What unites all these professions is that they make their arguments mainly with words – and schools teach how to make a value-driven argument using words.

However some of the pupils will make their way into programming. Now we learned from Larry Lessig that technical code same as legal code has a value and is not neutral. However most of today’s schools, at least in Germany, just don’t acknowledge this fact or at least do not encourage pupils to think about the societal impact of code. Actually most of them don’t even have mandatory informatics classes.

Jugend hackt, Festival of Code and the upcoming [Young Coders Festival](#) in Austria therefore make a tremendous contribution: Their bottom-line is not just the several thousand lines of code produced over one weekend, but their (hopefully but seemingly) long lasting impact on the values of young programming enthusiasts through the advocacy of open data, participation and collaboration. Events like these teach how to formulate a value-driven argument in code.

Everyone, who had the chance to see how passionate and already professional these 120 young coders at Jugend hackt worked on their projects, will be able to assume, what kind of superior technical skills they will have acquired in the near future. They are the ones writing the east coast code, which regulates our future life – online AND offline.