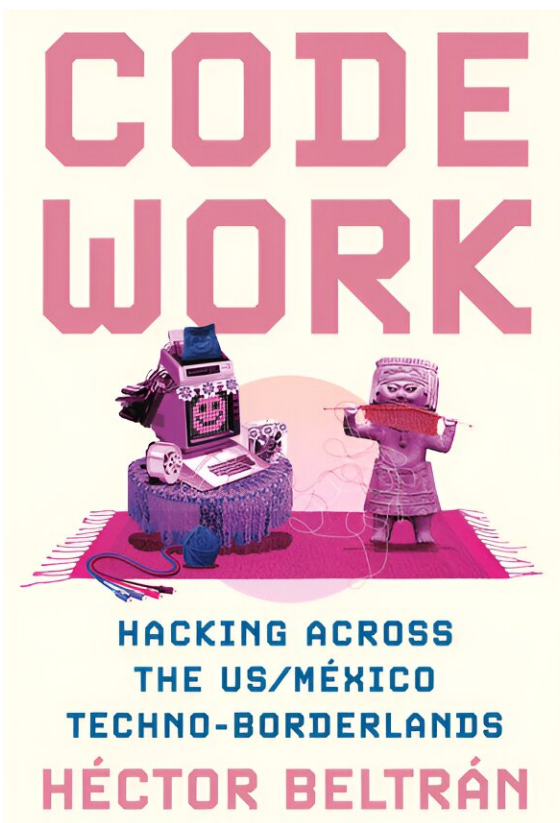


Book examines hackers in Mexico, whose work leads them to reflect on the roles they play in society

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Héctor Beltrán is the author of the new book, "Code Work: Hacking Across the U.S./México Techno-Borderlands," published by Princeton University Press.
Credit: Allegra Boverman

Several years ago, MIT anthropologist Héctor Beltrán '07 attended an event in Mexico billed as the first all-women's hackathon in Latin America. But the programmers were not the only women there. When the time came for the hackathon pitches, a large number of family members arrived to watch.

"Grandmothers and mothers showed up to cheer up the hackathon participants," Beltrán says. "That's something I had never seen in the U.S. It was inspiring. It felt good to see people who are usually excluded from these spaces being welcomed as part of this infrastructure of innovation."

In a sense, the grandmothers hacked the hackathon. After all, hackathons started as male-dominated code-writing marathons, often inaccessible to women—who, even when they join tech or other professions, also handle much of the "second shift," the unpaid family work women have been doing for generations. As one of the hackers told Beltrán, her grandmother "helps with everything in the day to day. She is the one that is in charge of everything."

But having so many women in the hackathon audience, Beltrán observes, made visible an often-ignored point: All that [unpaid work](#) by women is part of the "infrastructure" that has let men code and innovate and build their own careers.

"Things people normally don't think about, even like the structure of a hackathon, being there the whole weekend with your buddies, is something that has not been feasible for many women," Beltrán says.

Now, in a [new book](#), "Code Work: Hacking Across the US/México Techno-Borderlands," published today (Nov. 14) by Princeton University Press, Beltrán closely explores the relationship between computer culture and society in Mexico. In it, he finds that coding is

more than writing code: It's an activity generating fruitful reflection by the coders—about themselves, their political and economic circumstances, and what roles they can play in society.

"A core concept of the book is precisely that as you're coding and participating in these events, you're also constructing a sense of yourself and how you fit into these larger societal structures and engines of difference," says Beltrán, who is the Class of 1957 Career Development Assistant Professor in MIT's anthropology program.

Breaking into the field

"Code Work" builds on field research Beltrán conducted in Mexico, attending hackathons, conducting interviews, and scrutinizing the country's politics and economy. However, the roots of the project go back to Beltrán's undergraduate days at MIT, where he majored in computer science and engineering. After graduating, Beltrán worked in consulting; a trip to Mexico City helped spur his interest in the differences between the tech sectors in Mexico and in the U.S.

"I saw that there was really a disconnect between [different cultures](#)," Beltrán says.

As such, "Code Work" is an exploration of coding both as it is practiced within Mexico and in its relationship to U.S. computing culture. The book focuses extensively on hackathons, as events where the enjoyment and promise of tech innovation are evident, along with the tensions in the field.

In contrast to the U.S., where hackers have often gained cachet as "disruptors" shaking up the civic order, in Mexico coders are often trying to enter the established economic order—while also trying to use technology for social innovations.

"Usually we think about hacking in the Global North as a way to break out of certain constraints," Beltrán says. "But in the Global South, there are people who have been excluded from these global cultures of innovation and computing. Their hacking work [is a means of] trying to break in to these larger cultures of computing."

To be sure, Beltrán notes, tech culture in the U.S. has not always been enormously inclusive either. Referring to one Latino MIT student he observed who went to Mexico to participate in hackathons, Beltrán says, "I see this kind of move to go the Global South as a way to present yourself as someone from an innovative culture and be respected as an expert—to break out of the Global North's own hierarchies."

In studying matters of gender and tech culture, Beltrán examines issues involving masculinity and coding as well. The sheer hard work of coding can drive people to great accomplishments, but at times coders can be "outworking other people to the point of exploitation," he notes. And while "the information technology economy wants you to think," the labor of coding "complicates the division of mind and hand."

In the book, Beltrán also locates hackers who question the value of the hackathons they are participating in, noting that the winning entries rarely seem to become widely used applications; some hackathons function more as advertisements for innovation than engines of it. The tension between hacker independence and the larger corporate structures they perceive is a key motif in the book.

Such observations underscore Beltrán's view that hackers, while producing code, are highly reflective as well, actively thinking about their place in society, their political economy, and more. These hackers, Beltrán finds, often apply the intellectual concepts of coding to the world in illuminating ways. One hacker Beltrán meets views his own career as a series of "loosely coupled" jobs—borrowing a computing term for

marginally connected components. In the hacker's view, this has a positive aspect, in contrast to a career dedicated to working only for one firm of subjectively questionable value.

Thought piece

"Code Work" has earned praise from other scholars in the field. Gabriella Coleman, a professor of anthropology at Harvard University who also studies [hackers](#), has called the book "lucid, well-written, and lively," and adds that by "deftly hitching ethnographic material to literature in anthropology, Latinx studies, science and technology studies, and Mexican studies and history, Beltrán has enlarged and enlivened the scope and direction of hacker studies."

For his part, Beltrán says he hopes readers will understand his book as a work that is not only about Mexico but distinctly international in scope, exploring how cultures evolve in relationship to each other, while meshed in a global economy. The issues raised in "Code Work" could apply to many countries, he believes.

These are topics Beltrán is also examining in an undergraduate class, "Hacking from the South," which he is currently teaching.

"These are [complex problems](#) with a lot of moving parts," Beltrán says. "It's also very empowering for students themselves to make these connections." Many students, he thinks, thrive when they have the opportunity to think across disciplines, and take those tools and perspectives out into the world.

"As an undergrad, I thought I was learning something at MIT in order to go out and get a job," Beltrán says. "I wanted to come back to academia because it's a place where we get to think deeply about the structures we're entangled in, and question who we're becoming and how to

intervene in the world. Especially MIT students, who can potentially intervene by changing systems in a powerful way."

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