



# HACKED *to death*

*Is hacking wicked and antisocial, or cool and geeky? A brief history of tech's most two-sided term...*

**T**HE WORD HACKER has been everywhere recently, splashed across the front page for weeks as the “phone hacking” scandal at *News of the World* engulfed Rupert Murdoch and his media empire. There is a sensational mystique to the term that makes it irresistible to journalists.

But typing the default password “1111” into the voicemail box of a murdered girl is not hacking. Neither is bribing the police for the phone numbers of celebrities and crime victims. Unless we’re ready to call smashing the window on my Honda Civic “car hacking”, nothing in the News Corp scandal fits the bill.

“If it had been me, I would have broken into the phone company system so I could have had direct access to the messages of all their customers,” says Kevin Mitnick, who was for several years the most-wanted computer criminal in America, after hacking into the voicemail computers at Pacific Bell. “What News Corp did... guess pin codes, spoofing voicemails... that’s amateur script kiddie stuff.”

Mitnick, who now works as a security consultant and recently published a new book, *Ghost in the Wires*, said he’s disappointed to see what passes for hacking these days. “I can remember writing a

program in high school that was supposed to calculate 100 digits of the Fibonacci Sequence. It did that, but of course, it also stole passwords from my professor and classmates. But I didn’t get in trouble for that; I got an A, because my teacher recognised it was smart. That’s what hacking is supposed to be about – not crime, but innovation and creativity.”

In the 1950s, on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a great “hack” meant a practical joke; covering the campus dome in tin foil, for example. Among the nerdy members of the Model Railroad Club, a hack came to mean a feat





of technical skill, a particularly sweet switching station or miniature drawbridge. As these young geeks moved from laying track to working with computers, training massive IBM mainframes to make music and play chess, they took this attitude and vernacular with them.

### Ruining it for the rest of us

The word hacker began to mutate, like a quartet of teen turtles, during the late 1980s and early 1990s. What had been a compliment among programmers and

with access to information downloaded sensitive files and burned them to a CD. Writing Lady Gaga on the disc was a nice bit of misdirection, but hacking it was not.

The sad reality is that cyber-crime is on the rise. And in fact, News Corp has engaged in computer hacking. As *The New York Times* recently pointed out, the company paid \$29,5 million (about R235 million at the current exchange rate) back in 2009 to settle charges that it hacked into the computer system of a New Jersey-based company called Floorgraphics and stole

code, and at the end you have a product. Hackathons are these things where all of the Facebook engineers get together and stay up all night building things – and I do too. Usually I code alongside everyone.”

Zuckerberg’s comment highlights an interesting divide. Says author Steven Levy, whose 1984 book, *Hackers*, first introduced the term to the mainstream: “The word now has two branches; the one used among computer programmers and the one used in the media. On one hand, it means ‘to create’; on the other, ‘to steal.’”

## Zuckerberg: ‘To hack means to build something very quickly.’

engineers became a byword for cyber-crime. Hollywood played a big role: films such as *WarGames* and the eponymous *Hackers* made the word synonymous with mischief and mayhem.

The laws that sprang up to combat the rising tide of cyber-crime followed suit. “Hacking is breaking into computer systems, frequently with intentions to alter or modify existing settings,” according to the National Conference of State Legislators in the US.

“Sometimes malicious in nature, these break-ins may cause damage or disruption to computer systems or networks.”

A Google Trends chart of the period between 2004 and today shows the prevalence of hacking in the press isn’t just anecdotal; news coverage of hacking over the past three years has grown by leaps and bounds. Some of this coverage has been about *real* hacking. The attacks that penetrated Google’s systems in China and caused the search giant to pull its business out of that country. The infiltrators who stole sensitive data from hundreds of thousands of Sony customers. And the hack-tivism by Anonymous and Lulzsec that defaced Web sites of major governments and corporations.

But just as often, hackers have been convenient bogeymen. For example, it turned out to be Representative Anthony Weiner himself, and not a hacker, who posted a photo of the US congressman’s er... *package* to Twitter (if you missed the story, Google his name). When Pfc Bradley Manning was arrested for passing classified military documents to Wikileaks, news sources such as *Wired* and CNN speculated that Manning had learned the dark arts from MIT students he partied with at a “hackerspace” workshop in Boston. The banal truth was that an angry young man

information for a smear campaign that cost the small advertising company several major clients.

There were no 9/11 victims involved, no celebrities or young murder victims, and so the story went largely untold. Hell, the head of US cyber-security, Randy Vickers, resigned last year in the aftermath of hacking assaults on the US Senate, FBI and CIA Web sites. Yet the only major publications to carry the story so far have been foreign outlets, Reuters and *The Guardian*.

Hackers are like Jedi, wielding mysterious powers that enable them to peer into the private lives of normal people. Just as there are Jedis on the light and dark side, so hackers are divided into white and black hat, a porous boundary that contributes to confusion around the term.

Before he built computers, Steve Jobs and his partner Woz built blue boxes that helped phone phreakers hack their way to free long-distance calls. And the most widely known and admired young entrepreneur of this generation, Mark Zuckerberg, has dark hacking in his DNA. He didn’t ask for permission when he took the names and faces of his classmates and put them together into Facemash, an early experiment at Harvard that nearly got him expelled.

But when Zuckerberg sat down a while back with Leslie Stahl for a *60 minutes* interview, he tried to explain to her that Facebook was strictly white hat. “The graffiti is largely gone,” Stahl said to Zuckerberg during her tour of Facebook’s fancy new offices, “except for one word you just can’t miss. I see ‘hack’ everywhere. Hack! It has a negative connotation, doesn’t it?”

Replied Zuckerberg: “When we say hacker, there is this whole definition that engineers have for themselves; it’s very much a compliment. To hack means to build something very quickly. In one night, you can sit down and churn out a lot of

Adds Levy, who wrote in an update to the 2005 edition of his book that he had considered dropping the word altogether: “There was a time when ‘hacker’ had lost almost all of its positive connotation. But the community seems to have really reclaimed it for themselves, and that has spread... to the point where people talk about hacking healthcare or hacking education, and they mean working to make it better.”

Without a doubt, I’ve been guilty of misusing the word ‘hacker’ in the past. But I won’t any more. Hollywood screenwriters and harried journalists take note, lest you become hacks of an altogether different sort.

● First published in *The New York Observer*. Also see this month’s cover story, “The Secret War”.

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Kevin Mitnick, quintessential hacker.

Picture by Monty Britton, John Wiley & Sons