The Mercenary Techie Who Troubleshoots for Drug Dealers and Jealous Lovers

A while ago, a twenty-something geek we'll call Martin arranged a meeting with some potential clients in an unusual place: the sidewalk across the street from a police precinct on Manhattan's West Side.

"I do a lot of shit in front of precincts cause I feel a lot safer," Martin told me in an interview recently.

There were four of them, members of a Bronx drug trafficking crew. "It was like one of those TV special multinational shows," Martin said. "You got a white guy, a black guy, a Latino guy."

The leader of the crew believed he was under surveillance, and Martin made them leave their phones in the car for safety. He recalled the phones with disgust. "They had all smart phones, and I told them: Bad fucking idea. You have to scale down two generations, at least. There's too much information on a smart phone." That's where Martin could help.

Standing on the sidewalk, Martin explained the snoop-resistant system he had devised: a makeshift private cell phone network built around prepaid phones, dozens of SIM cards and plastic pill organizers—the kind seniors use to keep their meds in order.

"It keeps your comms [communication] internal from prying eyes," he assured the leader. "If someone's on your case, it trips up their investigation." All he needed was $7,000 and he could set them up with ten phones in a week.

Martin left with the cash, stacks of hundred dollar bills in his backpack, and got to work.

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Martin is a digital fixer. He wants me to call him a "mercenary hacker," although "renegade IT guy" probably better represents his skillset. Through a long history of hanging out with hackers, selling surveillance gear, and laboring on the fringes of the tech industry, Martin has developed a combination of technical skill and lack of scruples that makes him perfect for
Many of Martin’s clients are what he refers to, reverently, as “HNIs”: High Net-worth Individuals. They’re ambitious, wealthy New Yorkers for whom the Internet has amplified the status anxiety that has always haunted the kind of person who might be flattered by the label High Net-worth Individuals. A lot of what Martin does is sort of blackhat online reputation management. His HNIs want someone to burnish their online image by any means necessary, to game the algorithms and stats of the web like a skilled publicist greases reporters in the real world.

A businessman might ask Martin to bury an incriminating newspaper article deep in Google’s search results; a small-time entertainer wants a few tens of thousands of illicit views on his new YouTube music video. Martin said he was once asked to artificially boost the popularity of a nightclub on the location-based social network Foursquare. He couldn’t figure out a way past the location-based aspect of the service, so he hacked together a program on a laptop, lugged it in a backpack to the venue and automatically checked more than a dozen of fake accounts in.

When Martin first started, he would hang out at nightclubs and hand out his card to high-rollers. But now he’s passed around by word-of-mouth. “I’ve got a reputation as a fixer and a problem solver,” Martin said. “It’s like, ‘do you use Martin?’”

Unsurprisingly, one of the more common requests from these guys—they’re almost all guys—is access to a woman’s Facebook or email account. They expect Martin to sit down at his laptop, type a magic keystroke and lay out the intimate communiques of their lady friend. If only it was that easy.

“They have a lot of these fucking expectations like it’s fucking Hollywood,” Martin said. “I’ve got a reputation as a fixer as a fixer you use Martin?”

After running down the delicate legalities, he’ll tell them their best bet is installing a simple piece of software called a keylogger on their computer as the target enters it. For $3,000, Martin will install a full suite of surveillance software on phones and computers.

Martin’s familiarity with keyloggers dates to when he sold them while working at a surveillance gear shop soon after graduating from college in the mid 2000s. He hawked tiny microphones to jealous lovers and hidden cameras to Muslim parents worried about where their daughters went at night. After his boss retired, Martin inherited an expensive bug sweeper and connections to a lucratively paranoid clientele, many of whom became his first clients in his current gig.

Most of Martin’s clients, if not all of his tactics, are above board. But it was inevitable the drug dealers would come calling. They had been some of his best clientele at the surveillance gear shop, after all.

Martin showed me some of his gear the other day and explained the system he’d set up for his new York accent and deftly picked tiny
electronics out of his backpack with big hands, like a fisherman in a tackle box. He carries a weather organizer filled with SIM cards and business cards.

...s with busted screens on the table. These...t hadn’t been thrilled with downgrading...i high school girl might decorate with Hello...

"I... Martin said. So he upgraded them to the newer...n’t look like a fake Blackberry and it’s not a...vs principle behind Martin’s system:

But burners can be a pain. For maximum security, phones need to be switched as often as possible—a top Cali cartel manager was once reported to use 35 cell phones a day. Martin’s system makes it easy for a crew to switch all their phones rapidly.

With Martin's system, each crewmember gets a cell phone that operates using a prepaid SIM card; they also get a two-week plastic pill organizer filled with 14 SIM cards where the pills should be. Each SIM card, loaded with $50 worth of airtime, is attached to a different phone number and stores all contacts, text messages and call histories associated with that number, like a removable hard drive. This makes a new SIM card effectively a new phone. Every morning, each crewmember swaps out his phone's card for the card in next day's compartment in the pill organizer. After all 14 cards are used, they start over at the first one.

Of course, it would be hugely annoying for a crewmember to have to remember the others’ constantly changing numbers. But he doesn’t have to, thanks to the pill organizers. Martin preprograms each day's SIM card with the phone numbers the other members have that day. As long they all swap out their cards every day, the contacts in the phones stay in sync. (They never call anyone but each other on the phones.) Crewmembers will remind each other to “take their medicine,” Martin said.

Not only does Martin’s system make wiretapping difficult, Martin claims it can protect the group if a phone gets compromised. If authorities snatch or tap a phone from Martin’s system, they’ll have access to only 1/14th of the entire network. The crew can just replace their SIM cards from that day in the pill organizer, assured that the other 13 of their SIM cards are still secure. (For more information on what Martin’s system is—and isn’t—good for, check out this discussion in the comments.)

Martin said he had first thought up the pill organizer system while working briefly for a company that specializes in cellular forensic tools.

So far, managing cell phones for drug dealers is a tiny fraction of Martin’s work. He’s set up two crews with his cell phone system. After a month or so to top off the airtime on the SIM cards, he keeps track of on an Excel spreadsheet.
I did eventually get up the nerve to accompany Martin to the restaurant in the boroughs he said was a drug front owned by his trafficker client. I am not 100% sure it wasn't just a normal restaurant run by, say, a guy who had once dealt drugs. On the way there, the rising urge to vomit all over the subway car in fear was definitely real. I thought of a thousand creative ways I'd be tortured to death after being discovered to be a reporter, not at all comforted by the paper-thin cover story Martin suggested. (I was a friend from high school helping him out. He gave me some fake last name, which I instantly forgot.)

But when we got there, torturing me seemed unlikely. Martin said the purpose of the visit was to check out a new surveillance system, which his client wanted to be able to view on his cell phone. Instead the restaurant guy mainly was reviewing the place he'd received, unable to understand "haters," the one-star reviews the place hadn't suggested. (I was a friend from high school helping him out. He gave me some fake last name, which I instantly forgot.)

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I down the street to grab a drink. He seemed worn out. Earlier in the week he had sent me an email fretting about the legal position his work with drug dealers put him in.

"Google Jose Luis del Toro Estrada, aka 'Tecnico,'" he had instructed in the email. I did, and learned that Tecnico was a Mexican techie who had constructed an elaborate communications network for the Zetas drug cartel; in 2009 he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute cocaine in Texas.

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If this article is a product of the new system, I'm really looking forward to the change. Good agreement - a nice piece of work that wouldn't be out of place in a good alt-weekly or magazine. A promoted by Scouts Honor

Definitely a good read... one of those pieces that are still worth reading even if it's probably is legit, but even if it was total BS it was still worth the read...

Alt weekly not-out-of-placeness ACHIEVED.

Reminds me of some of the amazing Wired articles... Fantastic article, and I certainly hope this becomes a relatively regular feature!

Kicks off the 'Countdown to Loving Mitt'

Courageous Judge Stands Up for Little Tobacco

Less-Great Fragment of Great Wall of China Discovered in Mongolia

Dutch Killing Squads Will Make Housecalls If You Ask Nicely