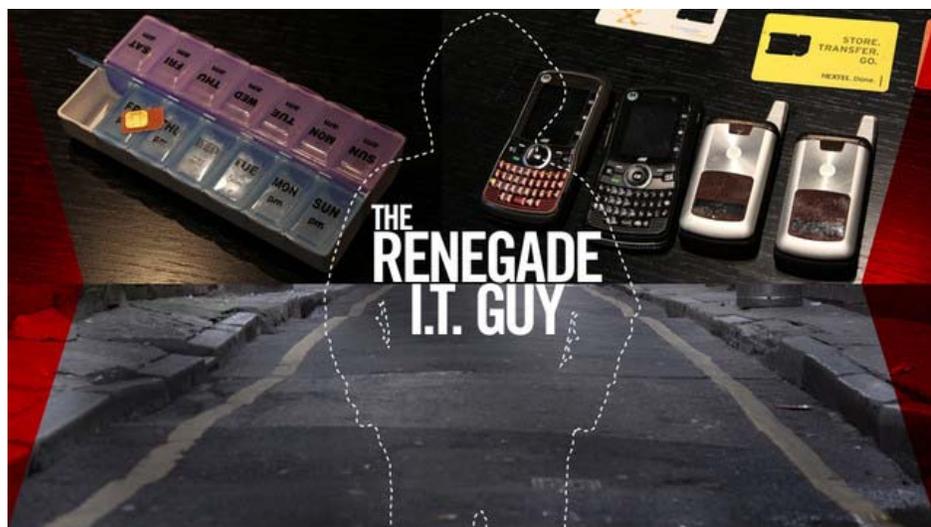


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TECH SUPPORT

The Mercenary Techie Who Troubleshoots for Drug Dealers and Jealous Lovers

BY ADRIAN CHEN JAN 25, 2012 12:13 PM

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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.

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



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When Martin first started, he would hang out... 263

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THE DUTCH let me knock some... you... 168

Dutch Killing Squads Will duped and you'll never see the m... 168

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After running down the delicate legalities, he'... 168

piece of software called a keylogger on their c... 168

as the target enters it. For \$3,000, Martin wil... 168

phones and computers.

Martin's familiarity with keyloggers dates to v... 168

surveillance gear shop soon after graduating f... 168

microphones to jealous lovers and hidden can... 168

their daughters went at night. After his boss r... 168

sweeper and connections to a lucratively para... 168

clients in his current gig.

Most of Martin's clients, if not all of his tactic... 168

dealers would come calling. They had been so... 168

shop, after all.

Martin showed me some of his gear the other... 168

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verently, as "HNIs": High Net-worth kers for whom the Internet has amplified the of person who might be flattered by the label n does is sort of blackhat online reputation h their online image by any means necessary, a skilled publicist greases reporters in the

minating newspaper article deep in Google's few tens of thousands of illicit views on his rice asked to artificially boost the popularity of . Foursquare. He couldn't figure out a way re hacked together a program on a laptop, tically checked more than a dozen of fake

nightclubs and hand out his card to d-of-mouth. "I've got a reputation as a fixer you use Martin?"

ts from these guys—they're almost all guys—is They expect Martin to sit down at his laptop, :ommuniqes of their lady friend. If only it

e it's fucking Hollywood," Martin said. "I'm someone tells you they can fucking do this ey again."

ell them their best bet is installing a simple puter, which can secretly catch the password istall a full suite of surveillance software on

n he sold them while working at a n college in the mid 2000s. He hawked tiny as to Muslim parents worried about where red, Martin inherited an expensive bug d clientele, many of whom became his first

re above board. But it was inevitable the drug of his best clientele at the surveillance gear

y and explained the system he'd set up for his w York accent and deftly picked tiny

electronics out of his backpack with big hands, like a fisherman in a tackle box. He carries a leather organizer filled with SIM cards and business cards.

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h... with busted screens on the table. These
at... hadn't been thrilled with downgrading
g... high school girl might decorate with Hello

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"I... Martin said. So he upgraded them to the newer,
d... sn't look like a fake Blackberry and it's not a
lu... Martin said.

ki... v principle behind Martin's system:
u... 'or a short time then abandon to thwart
ss... ated with drug trafficking and crime that New
). to buy one. (Martin said if I.D.s were
uld probably charge triple because I'd have to

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The Tech... es it easy for a crew to switch

With Martin's system, each crewmember gets...
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each crewmember swaps out his pho...
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Of course, it would be hugely annoying for a c...
constantly changing numbers. But he doesn't
SMOKING... is each day's SIM card with the ph... 263
Courageous Judge Stands Up
y all swap out their cards every day

never call anyone but each other on the pho...
DISCOVERIES... medicine, Martin... 181
Less-Great Fragment of Great
Wall of China Discovered in
Mongolia

Not only does Martin's system make wiretapp...
group if a phone gets compromised. If authori...
they'll have access to only 1/14... 168
THE DUTCH... the Buddy Killing Bill at Wizer, assu...
Make Housecalls If You Ask
Nicely.
out this discussion in the comments.)

Martin said he had first thought up the pill or...
company that specializes in cellular forensic t...
s.

So far, managing cell phones for drug dealers...
two crews with his cell phone system. After a...
around \$600 a month to manage it, which m...
month or so to top off the airtime on the SIM

y, phones need to be switched as often as
orted to use 35 cell phones a day. Martin's
r phones rapidly.

ell phone that operates using a prepaid SIM...
zer filled with 14 SIM cards where the pills...
h of airtime, is attached to a different phone...
id call histories associated with that number,
IM card effectively a new phone. Every
's card for the card in next day's
ards are used, they start over at the first one.

member to have to remember the others'
ve to, thanks to the pill organizers. Martin
e numbers the other members have that day.
he contacts in the phones stay in sync. (They
Crewmembers will remind each other to

; difficult, Martin claims it can protect the...
s snatch or tap a phone from Martin's system,
twork. The crew can just replace their SIM...
that the other 13 of their SIM cards are still
Martin's system is—and isn't—good for, check

nizer system while working briefly for a...
s.
a tiny fraction of Martin's work. He's set up...
-up fee of a few thousand dollars, he charges...
y consists of taking a couple hours every...
ds he keeps track of on an Excel spreadsheet.

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THE DUTCH Dutch Killing Squads Will Make Housecalls if You Ask Nicely 168

To that end, Martin plans to set up his clients automatically refills their SIM cards with airtel every month, so he can quit without screwing them over.

He emphasized that he has no moral problem with providing IT services to drug dealers. These guys, he said, had a terrible "technology gap" compared to his millionaire clients.

"I kind of see them like they're underdogs in a way," he said.

[Pictures by Brent Rose]

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in Martin to the restaurant in the boroughs he r c nt. I am not 100% sure it wasn't just a id ce dealt drugs. On the way there, the rising w definitely real. I thought of a thousand ei discovered to be a reporter, not at all rti uggested. (I was a friend from high school n e, which I instantly forgot.)

likely. Martin said the purpose of the visit was s client wanted to be able to view on his cell d to talk to Martin about some negative Yelp tand why he couldn't simply delete them. mplained of the one-star reviews. High by an obsession over their Google results.

ug I saw for sale was alcohol. But the fact s, and a few of the owner's shady-looking iving on its food quality alone. And do most onrolled surveillance camera set-up ined in the back room?

l down the street to grab a drink. He seemed email fretting about the legal position his

," he had instructed in the email. I did, and ad constructed an elaborate communications aded guilty to conspiracy to distribute

aid at the bar. "It's not like I need the money.

t some day where I'm just not going to take

th an online banking system that s every month, so he can quit without

roviding IT services to drug dealers. These npared to his millionaire clients.

ay," he said.

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, I really looking forward to the change. Good

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probably is legit, but even if it was total BS it



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