

Famed US hacker helps Ecuador secure its vote

February 17 2013, by Vanessa Teran



Members of the National Election Council check final details on the eve of general elections in Quito on February 16, 2013. Kevin Mitnick, who once gained notoriety as America's most wanted computer hacker, now heads a thriving Internet consultancy tasked with helping keep Sunday's presidential elections in Ecuador secure.

Kevin Mitnick, who once gained notoriety as America's most wanted computer hacker, now heads a thriving Internet consultancy tasked with helping keep Sunday's presidential elections in Ecuador secure.

"Eighteen years ago I was busted for hacking. I do the same thing today but with full authorization. How cool is that?" Mitnick wrote on his @kevinmitnick Twitter account on the eve of the vote.

Mitnick, 49, was behind a spree of break-ins of hundreds of corporate, university and personal computers on the Internet during the 1990s, with blue chip targets that included the Apple Computer, Motorola and the FBI.

After being caught and convicted for 15 years of cybercrimes, he was imprisoned between 1995 and 2000.

Today his company, Mitnick Security Consulting, helps to reinforce the very same [security vulnerabilities](#) that he once used his considerable hacking skills to exploit.

On Sunday, his company will focus on protecting the Net Lock computer system tasked with tabulating Ecuador's elections.

The incumbent president, Rafael Correa, is the prohibitive favorite to win re-election—assuming no foul play from exactly the sort of malicious actors that Mitnick has been hired to guard against.

Mitnick is rueful about his youthful days as a cyber outlaw. He says his hobby of hacking had its roots in his childhood.

"When I was a young kid I was really fascinated with magic, which I found, was similar to hacking. And I was a prankster as well, so I combined both," he said.

Mitnick started with simple gags: breaking into the phone lines of friends, hacking the self-service line at the local fast food restaurant so that automated voice would chide overweight customers to steer clear of

the fattier menu items.

Later, as Mitnick graduated to more sophisticated hacking activities, he came to love the thrill of the chase, as he managed time and again to elude the authorities who tried to track his online exploits.

Eventually he targeted the biggest fish of all—the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"It became kind of cat and mouse with the FBI. I was a fugitive from the FBI for a long time, when they were trying to get me I would track them through the cellular system and outsmart them," he told AFP.

His targeting of America's federal cops proved his undoing, however.

FBI agents, angered by his taunting of them, were able to track and eventually arrest Mitnick in 1995, with the help of a Japanese computer expert.

Mitnick said he has gone straight since his release from prison, and now uses his talents to track down other cyber miscreants.

He told AFP that—like the magic tricks he loved as a child—the hacking trade works through a kind of sleight of hand.

"It's using manipulation, deception and influence to get a person to do some sort of action or reveal information," he said.

But while it was intoxicating to figure out how to tap into the world's most secure computer networks, Mitnick said he never did so for financial gain.

"It was all for intellectual challenge, the adventure and the thrill," he

said.

"I never tried to profit or tried to publish it," he said. "I kept it to myself to understand how things work."

Some see a certain irony in the fact that Mitnick, in monitoring Sunday's elections, is aiding the same Ecuador government that is sheltering another Internet vigilante—WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Assange took refuge in Ecuador's embassy in London to avoid extradition to Sweden over allegations of rape and sexual assault.

The Australian former [computer hacker](#) enraged Washington after WikiLeaks released tens of thousands of secret US military and diplomatic cables, revealing a sometimes embarrassing, behind the scenes glimpse of American diplomacy, and causing what US officials called a major security breach.

For his part, Mitnick said he views Assange as blameless for the leaks.

"Julian Assange was just the receiver of the information, the one who published it. I don't look at him as criminally culpable."

On the other hand, "the whole thing speaks very badly about the US military security," the Internet safety expert said, calling the massive document release "one of the biggest security wake-up calls of the century."

(c) 2013 AFP

Citation: Famed US hacker helps Ecuador secure its vote (2013, February 17) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-famed-hacker-ecuador-vote.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.