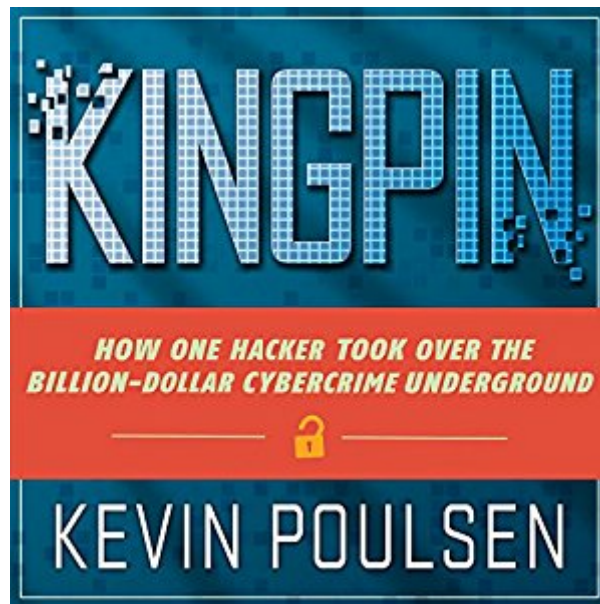


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Kingpin: How One Hacker Took Over The Billion-Dollar Cybercrime Underground



Synopsis

The word spread through the hacking underground like some unstoppable new virus: Someone - some brilliant, audacious crook - had just staged a hostile takeover of an online criminal network that siphoned billions of dollars from the U.S. economy. The FBI rushed to launch an ambitious undercover operation aimed at tracking down this new kingpin. Other agencies around the world deployed dozens of moles and double agents. Together, the cybercops lured numerous unsuspecting hackers into their clutches. Yet at every turn, their main quarry displayed an uncanny ability to sniff out their snitches and see through their plots. The culprit they sought was the most unlikely of criminals: a brilliant programmer with a hippie ethic and a supervillain's double identity. Together with a smooth-talking con artist, he ran a massive real-world crime ring.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've read and reviewed almost all of the non-fiction computer crime and espionage books written since the 1980s. Kingpin by Kevin Poulsen is one of my favorites. I will recommend this book to fellow digital security professionals and those who would like insights into our world. Kingpin's coverage of Max Ray Butler's (MRB) constant entanglement with the dark side is a lesson for anyone contemplating using their skills for evil. One of the reasons I enjoyed reading Kingpin is that I've been familiar with the case since 1998. Poulsen described how MRB exploited vulnerable BIND instances on Air Force and other DNS servers that year. I happened to be a captain in the Air Force CERT and worked with the analyst who discovered MRB's exploitation of Air Force name

servers. Because of my familiarity with this case (limited though it may be), I identified more than one instance where Poulsen seemed to take what I consider to be an unnecessarily "sympathetic" or "understanding" approach to MRB's actions. For example, if MRB acted in the best interest of the Air Force by exploiting and then patching DNS servers, he didn't need to leave a rootkit behind. Worse, he didn't need to return to the compromised systems via his rootkit and backdoor once his "work" was done. Poulsen didn't question MRB's stated motives by presenting a more reasonable explanation for this activity: MRB was a black hat and acted like one. I noted more "sympathy" for MRB when Poulsen described the incident where MRB choked his girlfriend. Instead of saying MRB "choked his girlfriend," Poulsen wrote on p 11 that "Max began trembling. Then his hands were around her throat and he was pushing her down onto the mattress."

This is my first review for .com, I had enough thoughts on Kevin Poulsen's "Kingpin" to warrant sharing them. If you're reading this, you're likely thinking "Should I buy this book?" The answer is "absolutely yes" if you have any interest in the subject matter, "probably no" if you don't. I say this because "Kingpin" was written for a very niche audience. It deals extensively with the topics of computer security, cybercrime, and identity theft. The book often dives into 1-2 page semi-technical explanations of computer viruses, security holes in networks, or tactics used by hackers. Occasionally there will be one or two lines of actual programming code thrown in. It's all integrated seamlessly into the main narrative. The book is also based on a true story and contains a detailed list of sources for the facts used in each chapter. You DO NOT actually need any computer background to enjoy and understand the book, since Poulsen masterfully explains complex concepts and technical terms, but interest in this kind of thing is a prerequisite. If you don't care for computers and have no interest in the history or methods of hacking, you will not get much out of the book. There are other crime thrillers that focus more on character development and would likely be better suited for the average reader, like several of John Grisham's books. I bought this book because I am a first year college student thinking of majoring in Information Science. I had heard that this book provided a detailed history and authentic perspective on evolution of cybercrime and the computer security field, and I liked the idea of reading a novel and learning a few things along the way (I don't need another textbook in my life right now). The book surpassed my expectations!

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