Why Discuss Computer Crime?

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In public discussion of crime techniques, someone always asks whether it's prudent to talk about crime so openly.

The arguments against such discussion fall into two classes. Won't people get ideas? That is, will discussing crime lead to more crime? And won't descriptions of how to commit a crime teach criminals how to be more effective? That is, will discussing crime make crime prevention harder?

Yes, it is possible that describing criminal acts will suggest to people on the borderline of honesty that they could carry out a similar crime. Copycat crimes are a well known consequence of newspaper stories about any unusual crime. The romantic image of crackers in such movies as War Games and Sneakers may indeed contribute to the delinquency of computer-literate minors.

However, when computer crime techniques are put in perspective, it is hard to believe that the overall effect is to encourage crime. When I teach industrial and university courses on computer crime, I repeatedly stress that the criminals who abuse information systems and use computers in their crimes are enemies of society. Embezzlers steal the life savings of innocent victims; thieves and swindlers and extortionists increase the costs of goods and services for everyone; and blackmailers victimize the weak and push them into despair.

As you read descriptions of computer crime, be on guard against the seductive lure of crime. Some criminal techniques are so clever and so original that it's easy to fall into the trap of admiring the criminals. Remember that the criminals consider themselves better than you and me; they put themselves above the norms of decency and kindness that most of us strive for. Computer criminals are often intelligent, but at a fundamental level they are despicable and defective human beings.

If that mantra doesn't sour your admiration for crooks, nothing will.

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