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History repeats for former hacker
 By Mark Ward
 Technology Correspondent, BBC News website

For most people it must be hard to understand what confessed hacker Gary McKinnon is going through as the US attempts to extradite him to face trial.



Mr Bevan was also caught hacking US military networks

But Mathew Bevan can definitely sympathise with Mr McKinnon because, ten years ago, he was in a very similar position.

As a teenager Mr Bevan became adept at breaking in to computer networks. At first any system was fair game but he soon started concentrating on those run by US military institutions.

Like Mr McKinnon he was caught, charged and threatened with extradition for what he had done.

Net losses

The knowledge he had built up hacking business, university and government computers helped find connections to military systems that he exploited to gain access.

Reading about how Mr McKinnon got started, Mr Bevan said he was amazed that security had improved so little between the time he had been exploring US military networks and when Gary McKinnon was hacking.

The same failings let both Mr Bevan and Mr McKinnon gain access to supposedly secure systems.

"It just shows that in 10 years nothing has changed," he said.

The only difference is that in the time between the two cases the US government has been spending heavily to beef up computer security.

"Where have the budgetary increases actually been spent?" he asked.

Like Gary McKinnon, Mr Bevan was interested in information about UFOs and spent months combing networks in search of hidden data.

Mr Bevan can easily understand why Mr McKinnon kept hacking the same systems for so long when common-sense would have told him that his luck would run out sooner or later.

"You just feel like you are invincible really," he said, describing the feeling he got when he successfully broke in to a network.

Once a hacker has won access to sensitive networks, the urge to keep on going to find more hidden information was hard to fight, he said.

"I liken it to perhaps the feeling that a parent might get if they find their child's diary," he said. "They know they should not read it, they know its wrong

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[but] they just cannot help themselves."

Case closed

Eventually, US computer security investigators caught up with Mr Bevan, or Kuji as he was known, and he was arrested on 21 June 1996.

The US portrayed him as a dangerous potential spy rather than the teenager from Cardiff that he actually was.

He was held in a police station for 36 hours, charged under the Computer Misuse Act, and then freed to wait 18 months until the case came to trial.

It is a pity, said Mr Bevan, that the evidence against Mr McKinnon has not been exposed to scrutiny in court.

"I was almost gunning for my case to go to trial because of the amount of witnesses we had that were contradicting each other," said Mr Bevan.



Mr McKinnon could soon face trial in a US court

He added that there were "numerous" inconsistencies in the 40,000 pages of evidence submitted by the US that would have been good to mention in court.

"I can imagine that it would be the same in Gary's case," he said.

Although there were efforts made to extradite Mr Bevan, his case came to trial in the UK in 1998 but he was acquitted as it was judged not in the public interest to pursue the case. He now runs his own computer consultancy business.

Should Mr McKinnon face trial in the US and be sentenced to decades in jail, Mr Bevan feels such a sentence would be too harsh for what he has confessed to doing.

"Where is the leniency for admission of guilt?" he asked. "Let this guy talk to kids about how this trial has affected his life. Let this guy talk and discuss and explain, don't send him to a punishment likely to be worse than he would receive in this country for murder."

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