How Apple and Amazon Security Flaws Led to My Epic Hacking

By Mat Honan
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Photo: Ariel Zambelich/Wired. Illustration: Ross Patton/Wired

 Meet Mat Honan. He just had his digital life dissolved by hackers.

In the space of one hour, my entire digital life was destroyed. First my Google account was taken over, then deleted. Next my Twitter account was compromised, and used as a platform to broadcast racist and homophobic messages. And worst of all, my AppleID account was broken into, and my hackers used it to remotely erase all of the data on my iPhone, iPad, and MacBook.

In many ways, this was all my fault. My accounts were daisy-chained together. Getting into Amazon let my hackers get into my Apple ID account, which helped them get into Gmail, which gave them access to Twitter. Had I used two-factor authentication for my Google account, it's possible that none of this would have happened, because their ultimate goal was always to take over my Twitter account and wreak havoc. Lulz.

Had I been regularly backing up the data on my MacBook, I wouldn't have had to worry about losing more than a year's worth of photos, covering the entire lifespan of my daughter, or documents and e-mails that I had stored in no other location.

Those security lapses are my fault, and I deeply, deeply regret them.

But what happened to me exposes vital security flaws in several customer service systems, most notably Apple's and Amazon's. Apple tech support gave the hackers access to my iCloud account. Amazon tech support gave them the ability to see a piece of information — a partial credit card number — that Apple used to release information. In short, the very four digits that Amazon considers unimportant enough to display in the clear on the web are precisely the same ones that Apple considers secure enough to perform identity verification. The disconnect exposes flaws in data management policies endemic to the entire technology industry, and points to a looming nightmare as we enter the era of cloud computing and connected devices.

This isn't just my problem. Since Friday, Aug. 3, when hackers broke into my accounts, I've heard from other users who were compromised in the same way, at least one of whom was targeted by the same group.

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Moreover, if your computers aren't already cloud-connected devices, they will be soon. Apple is working hard to get all of its customers to use iCloud. Google's entire operating system is cloud-based. And Windows 8, the most cloud-centric operating system yet, will hit desktops by the tens of millions in the coming year. My experience leads me to believe that cloud-based systems need fundamentally different security measures. Password-based security mechanisms — which can be cracked, reset, and socially engineered — no longer suffice in the era of cloud computing.

I realized something was wrong at about 5 p.m. on Friday. I was playing with my daughter when my iPhone suddenly powered down. I was expecting a call, so I went to plug it back in. It then rebooted to the setup screen. This was irritating, but I wasn't concerned. I assumed it was a software glitch…

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