

OPINION



# Cyanide pills won't chase the nuclear blues away

For all you defeatists out there who feel nuclear war is imminent, Bernard Roth of the University of Texas has the answer: if the bombs start dropping, simply pop a cyanide capsule supplied by the University. Roth feels this enables the individual to "be prepared" in case a nuclear attack occurs.



Loren Steffy

What a wonderful way to deal with the social problems facing this country. If a situation becomes too grim, we'll just dig into the medicine cabinet and weasel our way out of it.

Unfortunately, life is not that simple. If everyone followed Roth's idea, nuclear warheads would still exist, but only corpses would be around to launch them. Perhaps that's an effective solu-

tion, but it doesn't do a whole lot for the betterment of society.

Roth claims that his pill proposal is a metaphor for nuclear arms, and in a way, he's right. Both the pill and the bomb represent failure. The bomb represents the first failure — the inability of two nations to cooperate even when the fate of their entire world is at stake. If a mushroom cloud starts rising on the horizon, Reagan's game of "our arsenal is bigger than yours" will become unimportant. Both countries, no matter which attacks and which retaliates, will already have lost.

The cyanide capsule plan proposed by Roth represents a second failure in the event of the first. If we screw up and fail to resolve our differences diplomatically, then we'll give up. We won't keep trying, we'll just quit, despite the rest of the world.

The United States and the Soviet Union may start the war, but millions of people in other countries will get caught

in the middle. Since we carry the greatest nuclear weapons in the world on our shoulders, we are also the bearers of the greatest responsibility where the use of those weapons is concerned.

The threat of a nuclear holocaust may be hard to swallow, but so are cyanide tablets. Popping a pill and turning our backs on society won't change anything. Social problems aren't like a bothersome little brother, we can't ignore them and hope they go away. We must confront the situation and solve the problem.

The answer is communication, not cyanide. Only through discussion, not destruction, can the United States and Russia solve the conflicts plaguing the relationship between our nations. The thought of cooperating with the Soviets may leave a bad taste in some people's mouths, but so does cyanide.

*Loren Steffy is a sophomore journalism major and a weekly columnist for The Battalion.*

# Computer jargon misused by press

There appears to be a recent trend among hack journalists to pontificate wisely on events using seemingly high-tech words in an authoritative fashion. In short, they use words that they themselves do not understand, and, worse still, attempt to define these words for their "less well-informed" public.

Reader's Forum  
Reader's Forum  
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In the Texas A&M University Battalion of 30 January, 1985, in the lower half of the front page, an article was published titled "LIBRARY PATRONS SUFFER FROM BREAKDOWN." The second paragraph defined computer hackers in a negative fashion that has become far too prevalent with today's poorly informed and largely computer-illiterate press corps. It said: "A hacker is a person who illegally invades a computer system and alters data within the computer's memory."

This was followed by a paragraph that paraphrased a statement by the Sterling Evans Library Director, Irene Hoadley. I, personally, prefer to assume that this misguided definition was in no way attributable to that person, as I am certain that she would never make that particular error in usage. Editorial review of the article also failed to eliminate this grievous characterization of "hackers" as subhuman deviates with questionable ethical values.

This is not a purely regional issue. The "War Games" movie received a huge amount of publicity, and caused the frequent abuse of the term hacker, as have recent articles in "National Enquirer," "Newsweek" and "Time." The case could be made that this meaning of the term is an evolving and acceptable usage. Perhaps it is the sensational tabloids such as "National Enquirer," "Time" and "Newsweek" that shape our American language to the exclusion of all other sources. Those who began using the term within the context of computers, however, would take exception to these negative connotations, and have been trying for several years to stop the uninformed from using that term in the recent and derogatory fashion.

The 1981 edition of "Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Unabridged)" proffers three main definitions of hacker, mostly as one who "hacks." On page 1018 there appear some seven main definitions of the word "hack," with numerous nuances listed under each main definition. None seem to concern themselves contextually with computers. It would, however, seem acceptable to say that "Hack hackers hack computer hackers," which could mean that "Hack (mediocre or uninspired) hackers (writers whose writings aim mainly at commercial success rather than literary quality) hack (make trite and commonplace by frequent and indiscriminate use) computer hackers (the injured parties)."

The following definitions of "HACKER" were published in "the HACKER'S DICTIONARY," by Guy Steele et al., copyright 1983, published by Harper & Row, New York. Steele states that the book is a revision of the "jargon file" maintained jointly by hackers in computer laboratories at Stanford, MIT, Carnegie-Mellon, Yale, Princeton, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The following seven definitions appear on pages 79-80.

"HACKER noun.

1. A person who enjoys learning the details of computer systems and how to stretch their capabilities — as opposed to most users of computers, who prefer to learn only the minimum amount necessary.
2. One who programs enthusiastically, or who enjoys programming rather than just theorizing about programming.
3. A person capable of appreciating HACK VALUE.
4. A person who is good at programming quickly. (By the way, not everything that a hacker produces is a hack.)
5. An expert on a particular program, or one who frequently does work using it or on it. Example: "A SAIL hacker." (This definition and the preceding ones

are correlated, and people who fit congregated.)

6. An expert of any kind. One may be an Astronomy hacker, for example.

7. A malicious or inquisitive individual who tries to discover information poking around. For example, a "sword hacker" is one who tries to deceive or illegal means, to discover other people's computer passwords. "network hacker" is one who tries to learn about the computer network, possibly because he wants to improve it, one can tell the difference only by context and tone of voice.)

It is truly unfortunate that the popular press chooses to emphasize only negative aspects of hacker as contained in the seventh definition. This has become a matter of concern in the "hack" community, but there is no organized, well-funded lobby that can prevent flagrantly negative usage. The controversy over the definition of "hacker" recently received much time, attention and editorial comment in the computerized electronic media, or the new of computerized bulletin board systems across America. The following is a message from a member of the self-proclaimed hacker community, which suggests a different label for those who illegally invade computer systems and alter data within the computer's memory.

From: WOODY (Lindsay Wood, San Diego, CA 92104)

Date: 8:32 p.m. Wed. Nov. 2, 1984

Subject: worms & hackers

We, the practitioners of the good and nonmalicious art of "hacking," ought to coin a name for those who maliciously penetrate other computer systems. This would give the press a name to scream when some nerd has messed up or otherwise illegally tampered with someone else's system. A suitable name from our viewpoint should be a name which doesn't have any apparent connection to legitimate computer usage. Also, it should have an inherently reputable connotation so that it would less likely be worn as a badge of honor by those in our field who think they have accomplished something noteworthy by their (puerile) actions.

The name I propose for this group of low-life people is "worm." This term is suitably disreputable and analogous to the actions of the group. "Worms" is already applied to types of computer programs developed by various countries for the purpose of causing opposition computer systems failures during times of international crisis or warfare — this particular case the "worms" are (sub-)human.

If you think "worms" is a good name for these people, then use it between yourselves and in conversations with the press. Maybe it will catch on.

— Woody

— end of forwarded message —

There are also numerous references to the use of the word hacker in the early historical documents of computing (1960-1980). These earlier references can be found in such relics of the past as "Dr. Dobbs' Journal of Computer Graphics and Orthodontia," or "Rumor Light Without Overbyte," which is one of the earliest published journals of computer lore. Study of the few surviving copies of these journals indicates that the term had evolved in a non-malicious and very positive fashion, as hackers were regarded as high priests, gurus, and sometimes even with a certain degree of reverence. Historians of the modern era will no doubt trace the etymology of the term and remark on the abrupt changes in usage that occurred in 1983 and later. I suggest that these changes were in large part due to the influence of the "War Games" movie on the misguided hack writers.

I hope that the use of the term WORM may replace the negative usage of the word "hacker" in this university community. A proposed bill currently before the Texas Legislature uses very different terms for those who gain unauthorized access to computer systems and alter data without the consent of the owner. In the Texas Penal Code, they are called criminals, miscreants and felons.

Paul M. Sittler  
Dept. of Veterinary Public Health

## LETTERS:

### 'Sheltering Arms' staff express thanks

EDITOR: Sheltering Arms is a Twin City Mission program that provides emergency shelter for abused and neglected children.

On behalf of the children and staff of the shelter, I would like to express our gratitude to Delta Zeta (Lambda Xi Chapter) for their generous contribution of \$1,000 to Sheltering Arms.

Our budget is limited and cash funds are always needed to help with the daily operation of the shelter. We have cared for many children in recent months and could not possibly provide for all needs without such caring people.

Joyce Sparks  
Administrator, Sheltering Arms

### 'Straights' shouldn't judge homosexuals

EDITOR:

It saddens me when "straight" people absolutely declare that homosexuality is wrong. What is wrong to some people may not be wrong to another. These absolutists tend to view homosexuality in terms of their own heterosexuality. They do not understand homosexuality because they are not gay and to them it is wrong. But to a gay person, heterosexuality is as much a mystery as homosexuality is to a straight person. A gay person does not choose to be gay anymore than a straight person chooses to be straight. Could it be that heterosexuality is "wrong" for a gay person.

So before you condemn homosexuality from a heterosexual standpoint, put yourself in the position of a gay. What if the majority of the world were homosexual and you, as a heterosexual, were condemned by gays from a homosexual standpoint and labeled "unnatural?" After all, homosexuality is as completely "natural" for a gay person as heterosexuality is for a straight person.

Glenn Murtha  
Class of '86

### Being close-minded is never admirable

EDITOR:

I disagree with Mr. Bastion: being close-minded is never admirable. Many "established facts" have proven wrong. Spontaneous generation, the sound barrier, and the inherent inferiority of non-white races are only three examples.

Two plus two equals four is basic arithmetic, but in more advanced mathematics the answer may not be so simple. Similarly, there may be absolute truth, but you are deluding yourself if you think you have found it, even in the Bible. The revealed word of God is also translated, interpreted, and edited.

If you close your mind to the possibility that you are wrong, then you have stopped searching for truth. There is nothing admirable about that.

Kevin McLeod Bailey  
Class of '87

### Some minorities take advantage of rights

EDITOR:

Lately there has been a sudden increase in the number of civil rights violations — not in hiring practices or voting, but in some very puzzling ways I find hard to understand. Take for instance the situation last year when a Houston police officer found himself about to be run down by a car. He shot and killed the driver, a minority, and avoided being hit. Consequently, he was accused of violating the man's civil rights.

More recently is the all too familiar case of Bernhard Goetz. His would-be muggers are now charging him with violating their civil rights.

In order for these men to have violated any civil rights, their actions would have to have been racially motivated. Clearly they acted in self-defense with no disregard for anyone's civil rights. It appears that in some cases minorities are abusing this tactic by making outlandish charges. When will this abuse of our legal system end?

Mark Browning  
Class of '88

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The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes within the Department of Communications.

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