

14. Suicide Hacker

Fred was a promising computer science major at a prestigious school, so his death, an apparent suicide, came as a shock to everyone. He had driven home after a party, closed the garage door, and sat in his car without turning off the engine. The autopsy showed he died of carbon monoxide poisoning. The insurance company refused to pay on his life insurance because his policy excluded death from suicide.

Sally, Fred's older sister, asked her boyfriend, Hal, if he could gain access to whatever information Fred may have left behind. Hal was a computer science major and far more familiar with computers than any of Fred's surviving family, but was not a "hacker." Sally, acting as executor, wanted to know if there was any sort of evidence that his death may have been accidental. But more importantly, they wanted to know, if Fred had indeed killed himself, what could have possibly driven him to do it.

Hal posed the question anonymously to an online community of computer nerds, asking (1) what was the right thing to do, and (2) if cracking into Fred's accounts was ethical, how would he go about doing it? Specifically, he wanted to know how to crack the root password on Fred's Linux laptop, how to get into his Gmail and Hotmail accounts, and how to access a secondary MySpace account tagged "private." He explained the circumstances and emphasized that he wouldn't crack into the accounts of anyone who was alive, but wasn't sure what to think about privacy of a dead person.

The original post generated nearly 800 replies, almost all of which were serious attempts to answer the numerous questions that Hal raised explicitly or implicitly. Gradually, a consensus emerged that Fred's accounts were his property and, as such, ownership passed to the executor of the estate, such as it was. At the request of the executor, Hal would be acting with complete propriety if he recovered any data from those accounts. For several posts, the conversation dealt with how to bypass the passwords of Linux systems and gain access to passwords to other accounts that may be stored in Firefox or other programs. Then, one person mentioned, almost in passing, that for the sake of the family, Fred should take a moment to "accidentally" delete any porn and such that Fred may have collected, just as a matter of common courtesy. Another poster added that there was a military tradition of cleaning up the locker of a dead companion by taking out any men's magazines, letters to local girlfriends, or anything that would make the soldier's family and friends think less of him or cause pain to survivors. Another pointed out that there was a problem with picking and choosing what to edit--what if there were some nasty things that Fred had been involved in that actually led him to commit suicide, or worse yet, what if it was something the family had done?