Alumni

Hacking It

By
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In the commons room of an NYU dormitory this summer, Aditya Mukerjee ’12CC sat with other HackNY fellows amid a jumble of tangled power cords, empty pizza boxes, and cans of Red Bull. It was 4 a.m., and the hackers had been at it all day and night. Incessant clicking filled the air, while questions about computer languages — Java, Delphi, PHP — flashed over the monitors, leading to new lines of code that sparked from the fingertips of the programmers behind the screens.

Ah, hackers. Their vocation so misunderstood, their good name sullied by those who would gain illegal access to your bank records.

“If you think hacking is a bad thing, you’re probably not a hacker,” says Chris Wiggins ’93CC, an associate professor of applied mathematics at Columbia. For Wiggins, hacking means building on existing technologies to make them better and more powerful.

In 2010, Wiggins, with Hilary Mason, of the URL-shortening service Bitly, and Evan Korth, an associate professor of computer science at NYU, cofounded HackNY, a nonprofit that, according to its mission statement, “aims to federate the next generation of hackers for the New York innovation community” through student hackathons (those heavily caffeinated all-night coding sessions), internships, and informal networking events.

“Last year, a blogger wrote that New York has a problem — that there are no good engineers here,” Wiggins says. “But I know all these energetic and creative engineering students. So I asked myself: ‘What can engineering faculty do to improve opportunities for students?’”

It was a real question in a market where, for every 10 coding and programming jobs, there is one qualified engineer to fill the role. HackNY acts as a kind of matchmaker, pairing talented young engineers like Mukerjee with the increasing number of technology start-ups in New York, like Etsy, Gilt Groupe, Tumblr, OkCupid, and BuzzFeed. In 2010, there were 12 HackNY fellows creating online games, social-media applications, and even musical instruments for iPhones. This year, there were 35.

Mukerjee, a double major in computer science and statistics, worked on the data team at Foursquare, a social-media site that allows members to let others know where they are by checking in with their smartphones. The person with the most check-ins at any given location is considered the “mayor” of that place.

Foursquare has more than 10 million members who check in about 3 million times a day. These numbers resulted in a problem that any start-up would love to have: an overwhelming amount of data. Mukerjee helped write code to organize this data, and also analyzed where members check in most often and the things they say when they do. The data revealed that Foursquare users type the word “Yay!” about six times more often than they type “Ugh!” Knowing that, Mukerjee’s team was able

to create heat maps of New York, London, and Hong Kong that compared the “Yay!” levels of users in different neighborhoods in those cities. (For those keeping score, the Upper West Side appears to be happier than the Upper East.)

Although Mukerjee has been interested in New York’s start-up community for a long time, he says he never would have thought to apply to Foursquare on his own. He enjoyed the perks of the fellowship so much — the lectures about the start-up environment in New York City, the student-led meetings where fellows shared new technology skills and efficiency tricks over pizza, the “DemoFest” at the program’s end that showcased their work — that he extended his internship beyond the 10-week program.

Now, as the fall semester begins, he’s back at Columbia, bringing his new knowledge to his role as the publisher of the *Spectator*. And, of course, he’s the mayor of the Spectator Publishing Company.

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