Code crack opens the iPhone floodgates

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Australians are thumbing their noses at Apple's 2008 launch date for the iPhone, importing the device from the US and hacking it to work on local networks.

The hacks, unveiled just over a month ago and extensively documented online, break the locks that were intended to restrict iPhone use to the AT&T network in the United States.

According to one member of a group of Australians who have been collaborating on a hack, there are at least 30 or 40 people in Australia who are running the Apple phones using local SIM cards issued by carriers such as Telstra and Optus.

"The genie's definitely out of the bottle," said the man, who did not wish to be named. "We're getting reports of people using them all over the place."

Alex Voevodin, general manager of Votech, the exclusive Australian reseller of TurboSIM, a $149 tool that is essential in conducting one of the iPhone unlocking methods, said he had to shut down his online store late last month after being inundated with orders.

He said over 1500 orders were received in four days, many of which remained unfulfilled as Voevodin waited on a new TurboSIM shipment from the manufacturer, Bladox, which is expected to arrive early next week.

Voevodin said he sold less than 100 units a year before the TurboSIM iPhone hack was unveiled.

"I'm getting hundreds of emails a day from people who want to be on the TurboSIM waiting list," he said.

And not all of the iPhone hackers are motivated by the desire to be among the first in Australia to own the device. Australian eBay users began listing unlocked iPhones on eBay last week, one of which sold yesterday for $1700.

In the US, the iPhone comes in two models which retail for $US499 and $US599.
Using TurboSIM to unlock the device is just one of several methods - a similar tool, Super SIM, has been used by the loosely knit group of Australian hackers to achieve the same result.

Both TurboSIM and Super SIM trick the phone into thinking it is operating on an AT&T SIM card using a technique called SIM cloning.

However, using Super SIM to unlock the iPhone is more complicated than using TurboSIM, and Super SIM does not work with SIM cards bought within the last three or four years.

The Australian hacker said that all the phone functions were working as they should except for two features: visual messaging and the YouTube channel.

The iPhone is currently only sold in the US where it was launched at the end of June. Apple has struck a multi-year deal to give exclusive rights to the carrier AT&T.

The touch screen phone is due to be launched in Europe by the end of this year and in Australia and Asia next year.

Unlike the much-ballyhooed hack credited to 17-year-old George Hotz last week, the workarounds used by the Australians do not require the phone case to be open and a soldering iron to be used.

"If you use the soldering method, if you ever have a warranty problem with the iPhone, Apple's not going to touch it," the Australian hacker said.

"Whereas what we're doing is simply a software patch. If you have any problems, you simply restore it [to its original settings]."

He said the Super SIM hack was relatively easy to master and was widely documented on the internet. Although the hacker has a technical background he said with the documentation around it was something a novice could master.

When asked about the legality or otherwise of the iPhone hacks, a spokesperson for Apple Australia sidestepped the question.

Voevodin said neither he nor Bladox had heard "a single word" from Apple or AT&T on the legality of selling the TurboSIM product, but said he was not worried.

"We're not showing them how to unlock their iPhones - we leave that up to other people to do," he said.

There are even suggestions that Apple is turning a blind eye to the hacks because all the interest in the phone only increases its desirability.

"To be honest, I really don't think it's their priority [to stop people]," the Australian hacker said. "Any talk about the iPhone is only going to increase their market share."
Meanwhile, CNN has reported that a group of anonymous software developers said they would soon start selling a program that could unlock the iPhone without the need for any special hardware like TurboSIM or Super SIM.

The hack took about two minutes to complete and allowed the iPhone to run on a non-AT&T network.

The developers would not give CNN their last names, saying "we don't want to be hounded". But they said they would sell the software once their online payment system was ready and pending further advice from their lawyers.

A similar software program is also being developed by a British firm, UniquePhones. However, the BBC reported last week that the firm was rethinking its plans following legal threats from AT&T.