

## /dev/random

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### CYBERWORDS

*CYBER, CYBER, burning bright:  
In the headlines, left and right;  
What misplaced idolatry  
Has brought thee thus to primacy?*

Cyber- a combining form representing computer (cybertalk; cyberart; cybercafé) and by extension meaning “very modern” (cyberfashion).  
[<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>]

**B**ased on this introduction and my little attempt at poetic mockery up there, you probably think I’m going to launch into some tedious diatribe against those who make up terrible new words or overuse a basically meaningless existing one, but as usual you do me an injustice. I am in fact newly fascinated by the versatility of the adjectival prefix cyber. It is not only versatile, it apparently possesses much arcane power—as evidenced by the sudden and dramatic increase of any budget in which it appears. It evinces a great deal of bluster linguistically, as well. Take any ol’ word that’s been around since your grandmother was in analog diapers, tack cyber onto the front end, and bippity-boo! A new threat/trend/industry/social sensation leaps fully formed from the forehead of iniquity. Allow me to illustrate:

Terrorism becomes CYBERTERRORISM!

Crime becomes CYBERCRIME!

Criminals become CYBERCRIMINALS!

Power becomes CYBERPOWER!

Bullying becomes CYBERBULLYING!

Punks become CYBERPUNKS!

Patriot becomes CYBERPATRIOT!

Spy becomes CYBERSPY!

Espionage becomes CYBERESPIONAGE!

Employment becomes CYBEREMPLOYMENT!

Security becomes CYBERSECURITY!

Space becomes CYBERSPACE!

And, of course: Armageddon becomes CYBERARMAGEDDON! ad nauseum (see Free Dictionary entry, above, for an even more horrifying expansion of meaning).

I employ the imperative voice here because CYBERWORDS are larger than life and must be shouted when used. I had to wear reading glasses while typing this, not so much because my eyes are bad as to counteract the necessity for scooting further back from the monitor to keep the CYBERWORDS from damaging them with their forcefulness. On the surface, CYBERWORDS are little more than etymological kitsch, but a deeper investigation reveals their subtle psychological potency. Since the prefix cyber conveys no specific information—only a vague suggestion that computers are somehow involved and the technical aspects are therefore beyond the average person's grasp—it can be employed in a wide variety of situations where no other single prefix would work. More importantly, it automatically lends the user a certain degree of “hacker cred,” since only a hacker would use words with cyber in them, right? It is well known that in private communications, we . . . I mean they . . . use cyber as many times as possible. It's cyberiffic! Invoking cyber in conjunction with employment is a sure-fire winner. You can spice up a ho-hum résumé in no time flat by converting all your boring normal experience and positions into cyber gold. I have been saddled with résumé-reading duty on several occasions at my own cyberjob and I never fail to be stricken by the number of people with significant cyber-professional lifestyles. After a few dozen exposures to this pathology, I realized that virtually any job in existence could be cyberized. Take this seemingly innocuous narrative, for example:

I stocked shelves in the electronics department, including CDs, DVDs, mice, printer inks and paper, cables, software, and assorted hardware such as Ethernet hubs, USB hubs, external hard drives, and thumb drives. I also swept and mopped the floors at night after we closed.

Let us run this tiresome, unmarketable mishmash through the miracle process of cyberization and cybervoilà! A polished, employment-assuring chronicle of high-tech cyberwizardry:

Coordinated cyberlogistics by ensuring the continued supply of cybermedia, cybermateriel for written cyberoutput, and cyberdatacommunications equipment. Also responsible for cyberdatastorage continuity and maintaining a cyberclean cyberenvironment.

Now, that's one young technophile on target to get the cyberjob they've always dreamed of. (Yes, I know that “they” does not belong in a sentence referring to a single individual, but as a columnist you have to be careful about these things. Originally I had “she's,” but then I thought someone might believe I was implying that women were only capable of menial jobs. When I

tried “he's,” I could hear someone complaining to USENIX that one of their columnists said that only men were smart enough to have computer-related jobs. I settled, therefore, on “they've” because English has no third person singular gender-neutral pronoun except “it”—but to use that in reference to a person is to imply that person is not truly human. Besides, according to Wikipedia “they” is now accepted in that grammatical role, and we all know how authoritative Wikipedia is. Capisce?)

As with any overused word, phrase, prefix, suffix, or hyperbole, it's going to get more and more difficult to understand precisely what a word beginning with cyber- actually means. I propose that we begin work now on a translation algorithm that we can modify as the insanity progresses. Perhaps it would be best to adopt the antivirus program model and create signature files we can update regularly as new atrocities are spotted in the wild. You can download the latest ones once a month and run all of your cybergarble through them to get a rough translation.

At its most fundamental, cyber simply denotes “computer” or “digital.” For example, cybersecurity is now being used as a replacement for “computer security” or the more ambitious “information security.” For the most part you can take any job that formerly contained elements derived from its association with the computing realm and slap cyber on it with impunity. Computer geek? No, cybergeek. Printer repair technician? Uh uh, cyberprint specialist. Computer-based training? How droll: cybereducation, my good man.

This current pandemic of cybermania appears, according to my research, primarily to have cascaded from the adoption by the U.S. government of cyber words in Requests for Proposals and their ilk. In order to appear more in tune with the requirements and therefore more likely to score those lucrative contracts, firms began to couch themselves in cyberosity. The more times they worked cyber into the proposal, the more warm fuzzies they and their stockholders got. Naturally, whatever products they create under the aegis of that contract will be liberally sprinkled with cybers, as well.

I must confess here and now that I was guilty of contributing to this disease early in its incubation period. In 2000 I wrote a feature article for *Security Focus* called “Calling the CyberCops: Law Enforcement and Incident Handling.” Had I known where cyber was taking us, or rather where we were taking it, I would have lopped it off and left it next to my workstation for the nice lady who cleans my office to carry away.

There will come a time, probably in the very near future, when cybers are so plentiful that they will overtax the linguistic environment and begin to force native words into extinction. At that point we will have no choice, if we want to preserve some semblance of comprehensibility in the language, but to declare hunting season on them. I will be right there on opening day, armed to the cyberteeth.