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MOTD

by Rob Kolstad

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Dr. Rob Kolstad has long served as editor of ;login:. He is also head coach of the USENIX-sponsored USA Computing Olympiad.

kolstad@usenix.org



Second Order Effects

I really enjoy observing the world in all its aspects, both human and otherwise, in order to try to understand why things happen the way they do – and to try to use that information to predict the future. If I ever get good enough at it, I figure I can exploit it in many different ways.

One of the subtleties that I truly enjoy is the notion of “second order effects.” You hear these all the time, particularly from politicians. In one polarizing debate, you’ll hear people say, “But if we tell our kids about [sex education, abortions, other religions, etc.] then they will just decide that it’s OK or even go out and try [it] themselves.” The knowledge won’t just be transferred for its own sake (e.g., to prevent disease, unwanted pregnancy, immorality, etc.) but, a second order effect is inferred.

The biggest second order effect I’m observing right now is the aftermath of the tragedy on September 11, 2001. This is now the largest denial of service attack I’ve ever seen. It is natural to seek security and safety – and no culture exceeds ours in its ability to take things to excess. Airport waiting lines, enhanced personal identification schemes, and a general fear/paranoia about “leaving the nest” are just some of the offshoots of this second-order attack. How many hundreds of person-years have we now wasted standing in line for security checks at airports? How much commerce has been disrupted by the understandable reticence to travel?

On another front, I was privileged to spend a weekend visiting northern California and co-editor Tina Darmohray. She and her husband shuttled me around in their vehicle among various sites. On one multiple-mile excursion on a sunny afternoon, she remarked on the lack of children playing outside. Sure enough, nine miles later I had seen but one child outside in a yard. Where were they?

Apparently, the fear of abduction and other dangers has motivated parents in that community to keep their children inside. This is carried to the point of escorting children to the car, shuttling them to a friend’s house, and making sure they get inside that house’s door before moving on to another task. This is surely a denial of service attack – and what message do the children hear? I contemplate having been brought up that sort of fearful environment and shudder. How can happy, well-adjusted adults who can perform reasonable risk-assessment emerge from a such a milieu?

One of my friends has suggested that all this has to do with our culture’s inability to assess risks. He asserts that the masses give far too much influence to isolated and unusual events. Of course, the media does little to help this. News is interesting because of its rarity, so rarer events (e.g., commercial airline crashes) get lots of play.

I wish that we can find a way through these denial of service attacks, a way to walk the streets and yards of our cities without fear and with a realistic approach to threats that really do exist within our society. I truly hope we can find a way for our children to be able to play in their yards. A permanent loss of that freedom is a huge one.