

BOOKS

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Wanted: Sheriff to bring some order to web's Wild West

Reviewed by: Chris Adams

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Creeping Failure

How We Broke the Internet
and What We Can Do to Fix It

By Jeffrey Hunker

McClelland & Stewart, 288 pages, \$30

THE Internet is an increasingly dangerous place to operate, according to this thought-provoking American book, which argues for increased state regulation of cyberspace.

Our computer systems are constantly being bombarded by attacks, and these online threats no longer emanate just from the basements of young hackers.

They are systematically launched by organized crime rings around the globe, as well as by hostile nations and terrorists.

Our response to these malicious attacks is often restricted to patchwork solutions -- like using garbage lids to fend off bullets.

In the meantime, hostile forces have proven their ability to knock out the national systems of their enemies, such as when Russia conducted cyber attacks while invading the neighbouring country of Georgia in 2008.

Closer to home, in 2003, John Gilligan, the chief information officer for the U.S. Air Force, voiced concern that hackers might seek to disable the U.S. Air Force by knocking out less secure portions of its IT network, such as those that support airplane maintenance and supply activities.

Author Jeffrey Hunker was the founding director of the American Critical Infrastructure Assurance Office, responsible for his country's online security issues. He also worked in the White House during the Clinton

administration with the responsibility of designing the country's first national cyber-security strategy -- which, he admits honestly, was highly flawed.

But what led to this crisis? Hunker cites a number of factors. He claims the Internet has outgrown its infrastructure due to e-commerce and social networking.

Internet service providers (ISPs) are not held responsible for users who launch digital attacks on others. Software developers who often produce flawed products that leave users susceptible to security breaches are not held liable for their mistakes. And national governments are not performing their role as regulatory authorities.

Hunker puts forward the London Fire of 1666 as a useful analogy for what happens when government is not doing its duty.

At that time, buildings were constructed in an unregulated public environment without any regard to the threat of fire. When fire broke out, the disaster was worsened by there being no city-supported fire-response system.

After the smoke cleared, most citizens saw the need for developing new building regulations and a reliable fire department.

To avoid a comparable disaster in what he calls the "cyber-city," Hunker calls for better regulations to be developed for the online community. At the basic level, he states, we need to find ways by which we can move beyond relying on faulty patchwork security solutions and anti-virus software.

Hunker makes a compelling argument to show that "a strong hand is needed" to ensure that the Internet is made more secure as it continues to meet the expanding needs of business, research institutions, government and consumers.

A new central global authority could put into place effective regulations to ensure that ISPs, software designers and users themselves are held responsible for abuses and threats to security in the online community.

With the rising tide of lawlessness, the "free for all" days of the online frontier may be drawing to an end.

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