

Security, justice, and the future

Security, despite the way it is often treated, is fundamentally about seeking justice – or at least it should be. The problem is that, looking at things from today, the future is never so clear that we know the implications of the things we do. And in security, the things we do directly effect the future lives of the people we live with and the society we live in. On a day-to-day basis, we do the things we do, trying to stop unauthorized activities, trying to define more clearly what those activities are, trying to attribute actions to actors, trying to show management what this means to them, and so forth. But every once in a while, we should take some time and step back to see the way we are affecting people and the society that we are creating.

There are many things we do in the security field that are less than gratifying. Nothing quite compares to searching through server logs for hours, finding the entry that tells us what happened and who did it, then trying to present the results in court, only to find that for one reason or another, the legal system didn't allow our efforts to result in the party we thought was responsible to be punished for the acts that were perpetrated. But on the other hand, nothing quite compares to the feeling of being accused of a crime you didn't commit. And if that accusation goes beyond a mere interrogation, it may grow into a legal battle where you sit in a jail cell with some mighty unsavory individuals for months or years, protecting your innocence all the way, losing your health, your family, your life's work, and your reputation. And even if the day should come when you are found not to be responsible, being released from prison after 10 years of incarceration hardly makes it all alright.

So there's the challenge we face as a community. The standards we put in place and the quality with which we do our work is, in many cases, the one and only thing that stands between malicious actors and those we serve and protect, and the one and only thing that stands between freedom and unjust incarceration for the innocent.

I complained openly at the RSA conference earlier this year and in this forum and others about the lack of ethics standards in the computer security field, and the community has started to respond in a way that I thought was highly unlikely. They responded by making an effort to create a unified set of ethics that actually have some foundations in ethics, pay attention to other professional fields and their ethical standards, and begin to address the equities issues that we all face in the balance between the different forces in the fight for truth and justice that, even if we are usually unaware of, we are all part of every day. I pause here to applaud their efforts and their progress...

[...the reader is asked to applaud for 15 seconds to join in the applause I just gave...]

A start is a start, but it's not the end. In the holiday season, at the end of the year, or at least once a year and hopefully a lot more often, I try to pause and look back at what I have done in the last year to serve justice and the society I live in and to think about how I can serve better in the future. And I think that anybody in the security field should do the same. How can we better serve? Should we have more surveillance or less? Should we lock down more of the Internet or less? Is spam worse than restricting freedom of expression? Is privacy more valuable than commerce? Is catching bad folks worth exposing good folks to voyeurism? Are we protecting computers or people? Engage in the debate or live with what others choose!