**Chapter 29**

**Beyond “Computer Says**  
 **No”**

At the start of this century, security technology was an archipelago of mutually  
 suspicious islands – the cryptologists, the operating system protection people,  
 the burglar alarm industry, right through to the chemists who did banknote inks.  
 We all thought the world ended at our shore. By 2010, security engineering  
 was an established and growing discipline; the islands were being joined up  
 by bridges as practitioners realised we had to look beyond our comfort zones.  
 The banknote ink chemist who didn’t want to understand digital watermarks,  
 and the cryptologist who could only talk about conﬁdentiality, were steadily  
 marginalised.

Now, in 2020, everyone needs to have a systems perspective in order to design

components that can be integrated usefully into real products and services. And  
 as these are used by real people, and often at global scale, our ﬁeld is embracing  
 the humanities and social sciences too.

Security engineering is about ensuring that systems are predictably depend-

able in the face of all sorts of malice, from bombers to botnets. And as attacks  
 shift from the hard technology to the people who use it, systems must also be  
 resilient to error, mischance and even coercion. So a realistic understanding  
 of people – staff, customers, users and bystanders – is essential; human, insti-  
 tutional and economic factors are as important as technical ones. The ways  
 in which real systems provide dependability are becoming ever more diverse,  
 and protection goals are not just closer to the application, they can be subtle  
 and complex. Conﬂicts between goals are common: where one principal wants  
 accountability and another wants deniability, it’s hard to please them both.

Starting in 2001, we began to realise that many persistent security failures

are incentive failures at heart; if Alice guards a system while Bob pays the cost  
 of failure, you can expect trouble. This led to the growth of security economics,  
 which the ﬁrst edition of this book helped to catalyse. The second edition in  
 2008 documented how failures were also increasingly about usability, and the  
 decade after that saw a lot of research into security psychology.

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So what next? By way of a conclusion to this book, I’d like to highlight

three things.

First, complexity. Computer science has spent seventy years devising an

impressive array of tools to manage technical complexity, but we’re now coming  
 up hard against social complexity. We can program cars to drive themselves  
 fairly well on the freeway or in the desert, but we can’t cope with cluttered  
 city streets with all those unpredictable people. We can encrypt messages or  
 strip people’s names from databases but we can’t stop social structure showing  
 through. And bullying people has its limits; “computer says no” is a fast way to  
 lose customers. It’s not enough to study how a computer system can interact  
 with a human; we need to ﬁgure out how it can work with many interacting  
 humans.

Second, sustainability. As we put software in everything and connect ev-

erything online, we have to patch the software and maintain the servers. With  
 durable goods like cars, pacemakers and electricity substations, we may have to  
 maintain software for twenty or even forty years. We have no real idea how to  
 do that, and if we don’t crack it then our automation will be bad news for our  
 planet’s future. So-called ‘smart’ devices are often just things that have to be  
 thrown away sooner, when “computer says no”.

Third, politics. Security is not a scalar, but a relationship. It’s not some

kind of magic fairy dust you sprinkle on systems, but about how these systems  
 exercise power. Who loses and who gains when “computer says no”? Does the  
 social-network user get privacy, or does the advertiser get access? How is it used  
 to turn money into political power? And if people want public goods such as a  
 dependable Internet or a low rate of cybercrime, how can these be provided in  
 a global world?

The stability of cybercrime over a decade in which the technology has changed

completely suggests that it’s not fundamentally about technology. The persis-  
 tence of tech monopolies raises other questions about how tech and society can  
 co-evolve, and about the nature of power. When Facebook becomes the arbiter  
 of political speech, when Apple and Google can dictate policy on coronavirus  
 contact tracing, and when Amazon, Microsoft and Google dictate policy on fa-  
 cial recognition (outside China), then I suspect that technology people should  
 start reading up on political science, as well as on economics and psychology.  
 The most intractable problems of the next ten years may be around governance.

Just as individuals can learn through experience, so our societies learn and

adapt too. Democracy is the key mechanism for that. So a crucial way in which  
 engineers can contribute is by taking part in the policy debate. The more we  
 engage in the problems that technology poses around complexity, sustainability  
 and the nature of power, the faster our societies will adapt to deal with them.

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