**Chapter 25**

**Taking Stock**

**But: connecting the world meant that we also connected all the bad**

**things and all the bad people, and now every social and political**  
 **problem is expressed in software. We’ve had a horrible ‘oh shit’**

**moment of realisation, but we haven’t remotely**

**worked out what to do about it.**

– Benedict Evans

**If you campaign for liberty you’re likely to ﬁnd yourself drinking in**

**bad company at the wrong end of the bar.**

– Whit Di�e

**25.1** **Introduction**

Our security group at Cambridge runs a blog, www.lightbluetouchpaper.org,  
 where we discuss the latest hacks and cracks. Many of the attacks hinge on  
 speciﬁc applications, as does much of the cool research. Not all applications are  
 the same, though. If our blog software gets hacked it will just give a botnet one  
 more server, but there are other apps from which money can be stolen, others  
 that people rely on for privacy, others that mediate power, and others that can  
 kill.

I’ve already discussed many apps from banking through alarms to prepay-

ment meters. In this chapter I’m going to brieﬂy describe four classes of ap-  
 plication at the bleeding edge of security research. They are where we ﬁnd

innovative attacks, novel protection problems, and thorny policy issues. They  
 are: autonomous and remotely-piloted vehicles; machine learning, from adver-  
 sarial learning to more general issues of AI in society; privacy technologies; and  
 ﬁnally, electronic elections. What these have in common is that while previously,  
 security engineering was about managing complexity in technology with all its  
 exploitable side-e↵ects, we are now bumping up against complexity in human  
 society. Autonomous cars are hard because of the people driving other cars on  
 the same road. AI is hard because our cool new pattern-matching tools, such as  
 deep neural networks, can pick out not just real patterns in human behaviour –

781

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

sometimes unexpected ones – but false ones too. Privacy is hard because of the  
 richness of human interaction in society. And elections are hard not just because  
 of the technical di�culty of counting votes in a way that preserves both privacy  
 and auditability, but because of the huge variety of dirty tricks used by political  
 players, both upstream and downstream of the voting process itself. All of these  
 problems explore, in various ways, the boundary between what humans can do  
 and what machines can do.

**25.2** **Autonomous and remotely-piloted vehicles**

The aviation pioneer Lawrence Sperry invented the ﬁrst autopilot in 1912 and  
 demonstrated it in 1914, ﬂying past the judges in a ‘safer aircraft’ competition  
 in Paris with his hands up. In the process he and his father Elmer invented the  
 artiﬁcial horizon. A ﬁxed-wing aircraft left to its own devices will eventually  
 go into a spiral dive and crash; the pilot can keep it level with reference to the  
 horizon, but when ﬂying in cloud that external reference is missing. A gyroscope  
 can provide the missing reference, and it can also drive the ailerons and elevators  
 via servos.

In 1975, I got my ﬁrst proper job re-engineering a fast-jet inertial navigation

set to work on the midget submarines used in the oil industry. Engineers in the  
 same building were working on early head-up displays and satellite navigation  
 equipment. Each of these pieces of equipment weighed about 20kg and cost  
 £250,000 – about $3M in today’s money. All three together left little change  
 out of $10M and weighed as much as a person.

Now, in 2020, you have all three in your phone. Rather than three spinning

mechanical gyros in a precision-engineered cage, your phone has a chip with  
 MEMS accelerometers and gyros. It also has a GPS chip for satellite navigation  
 and a Google or Apple Maps app to show you how to walk, cycle or drive to your  
 destination. Over forty years, the cost has fallen by six orders of magnitude and  
 the mass by four. This has driven rapid evolution of assistive technology on sea,  
 air and land. Pioneering single-handed yachtsmen developed self-steering gear  
 to cross oceans from the 1920s, to give them time to sleep, cook and repair sails;  
 amateurs now have smarter autopilots for coastal cruising. Autonomous probes  
 swim beneath the Antarctic ice to measure how quickly it’s melting. The world’s  
 navies develop underwater mines, autonomous submersibles to ﬁnd them, and  
 much else.

**25.2.1** **Drones**

In the air, early weapons such as the German V1 and V2 used twin-gyro autopi-  
 lots, while the Cold War gave us the Tomahawk cruise missiles used to great  
 e↵ect in both Gulf Wars. In service since the early 1980s, these sneak under the  
 enemy radar by ﬂying close to the ground, and use terrain contour matching to  
 update their inertial navigation. They were followed closely by a variety of un-  
 manned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which saw their ﬁrst large-scale use in the war  
 between Israel and Syria in 1982; the Israeli Air Force used them for reconnais-  
 sance and as decoys, wiping out the Syrian air force with minimal losses. The

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 782 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

best-known of the next generation of UAVs was the Predator. Initially designed  
 as a reconnaissance vehicle, it could linger over a target area at medium alti-  
 tude for many hours, and was adapted to carry Hellﬁre missiles to strike targets  
 on the ground. In service from 1995–2018, it saw service in Iraq, Afghanistan,  
 Libya and elsewhere. It was replaced by the larger, faster Reaper, which became  
 a mainstay of the war in Syria against Islamic State. The world’s armed forces  
 now have a large range of UAVs, right down to small drones that soldiers carry  
 in their rucksacks and use to see what’s round the next corner.

Through the 20th century, enthusiasts built small radio-controlled model

aircraft, but the FAA only issued its ﬁrst commercial drone permit in 2006.  
 In 2010, Parrot unveiled its AR Drone, a quadcopter that could be controlled  
 by wiﬁ from a smartphone, and in 2013 Amazon announced it was considering  
 drones for delivery. Interest took o↵ rapidly; within a couple of years our stu-  
 dents were building drones and soon you could buy low-cost models in hobby  
 shops. The main application in 2020 is aerial photography. There have been  
 both insurgent and criminal uses, though, with drones used to deliver both  
 drugs and mobile phones to prisoners, while insurgents have ﬁtted drones with  
 improvised explosive devices for use as weapons.

**25.2.2** **Self-driving cars**

Most of the recent surge in interest though has been in self-driving cars and  
 trucks. In 2004, faced with mounting combat losses to improvised explosive

devices in Afghanistan and Iraq, DARPA decided to push the development of  
 self-driving vehicles, and announced a competition with a million-dollar prize  
 for whoever built one that could cross 149 miles of the Mojave desert the fastest.  
 The prize went unclaimed as no vehicle ﬁnished the course, but the following year  
 a team from Stanford led by the roboticist Sebastian Thrun collected the prize,  
 now two million. His robot, Stanley, used machine learning and probabilistic  
 reasoning to cope with terrain perception, collision avoidance, and stable vehicle  
 control on slippery and rugged terrain [1887]. This built on robotics research  
 going back to the 1980s, much of which DARPA had also funded. Their next  
 challenge in 2007 moved from the desert to a simulated urban environment;  
 competitors had to detect and avoid other vehicles, and obey the rules of the  
 road. This bootstrapped a research community and the technology started to  
 improve quickly.

Previously, carmakers had been steadily adding assistive technology, starting

with antilock braking systems (ABS) in the last century and progressing through  
 adaptive cruise control (ACC), which I described in section 23.4.1, automatic  
 emergency braking (AEB) and lane keeping assist (LKA). The industry vision  
 was that these would eventually come together into a full autopilot. Inspired by  
 the DARPA challenges, Google hired Sebastian Thrun to lead Project Chau↵eur  
 in 2009 with a goal of building a fully self-driving car. This was announced in  
 2010, stimulating a market race involving both the tech and auto industries.  
 Tesla was the ﬁrst to ﬁeld a product in 2014, when its ‘Autopilot’ software  
 was launched as an over-the-air upgrade that could take control on the freeway  
 or in stop-start tra�c. There was already a hype cycle underway for machine  
 learning, which I’ll discuss in the next section, and self-driving cars hitched a

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 783 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

ride. Tesla’s Elon Musk was predicting full autonomy by 2018, and Google’s  
 Sergey Brin by 2017, before the Google car project was spun o↵ as Waymo  
 in 2016. People talked excitedly about low-cost robotaxis causing personal car  
 ownership to be replaced by mobility-as-a-service; the arrival of Uber added a  
 further competitor, and the hype scared even auto industry execs who should  
 have known better into predicting that by the mid-2020s people wouldn’t own  
 their own cars any more. The hype cycle passed, as it always does. As I write in  
 2020, Waymo is operating a limited self-driving car service in a 50-square-mile  
 area of Phoenix [871]. The service isn’t available when it’s raining, or in dust  
 storms, and is monitored in real-time by humans at a control centre. It had  
 been announced several times, but problems kept on forcing the company to  
 put safety drivers back in the cars. So what’s going on?

A large part of the answer is that other road users are unpredictable. Au-

tomation can deal with some of the resulting hazards: if the car in front brakes  
 suddenly, a robot can react faster. Adaptive cruise control cuts driver fatigue  
 and even cuts congestion once enough vehicles use it, as it damps the propa-  
 gation of shock waves through tra�c. But even here there are limits. When  
 engineers extended the technology to automatic emergency braking, the inabil-  
 ity to infer the intentions of other drivers became a limiting factor. Suppose for  
 example you’re driving on an open country road when the car in front indicates  
 a turn and starts to slow down. You maintain speed as you expect it’ll have  
 left the road by the time you get there, and if not you’ll just overtake. But the  
 AEB might not understand this, so as you get too close to the turning car it  
 activates, throwing you forward on your seat belt. Consumer tests of AEB sys-  
 tems in 2020 still show quite some variability, both in the false alarm rate and  
 in the ability to stop the car in time when a pedestrian dummy is pulled across  
 the road. Some systems restrict activation to city rather than highway speeds,  
 and in 2020 all tend to be options available on more expensive models. AEB  
 should be in all new cars in about 2022. Since 2016 insurers have been happy  
 that it reduces the overall risk; I’ll discuss safety assurance in section 28.4.1.

But each new assistive technology takes years to optimise and debug, and

it’s not straightforward to combine a dozen of them into an autopilot. The pa-  
 per that Sebastian Thrun and his team wrote to describe Stanley gives a useful  
 insight into the overall technology [1887]. There are several dozen programs  
 interacting loosely, reﬂecting our understanding of how humans do such tasks;  
 your subconscious looks at all sorts of things and brings hazards to your atten-  
 tion. Simultaneous processes in Stanley handled path planning, steering control  
 and obstacle avoidance; this used laser rangeﬁnders up to 22m, a colour camera  
 beyond that, and a radar beyond that (which was not used in the race, as Stan-  
 ley was given over 2000 waypoints for a predetermined course). Each of these  
 systems had to solve many subproblems; the vision system, for example, had  
 to adapt to changing light conditions and road colour. Stanley then had to be  
 optimised via extensive testing, where the objective function was to maximise  
 the mean distance between catastrophic failure (deﬁned as the human safety  
 driver taking over).

Combining the subsystems means compromises, and while the main vendors

hold their design details secret, we’re starting to learn about the optimisations  
 and what goes wrong with them from accidents. For example, when a self-

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 784 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

driving Uber killed Elaine Herzberg in Arizona in March 2018, it emerged at  
 the NTSB inquiry that Elaine had been pushing a bicycle and the vision sys-  
 tem ﬂapped between identifying her as a pedestrian and as something else, but  
 ultimately she was not recognised as a pedestrian because she was not on a  
 crosswalk. AEB might have stopped the car but it had been turned o↵ “to

reduce the potential for erratic vehicle behavior” – in other words, because the  
 false alarm rate was annoying [457]. Ultimately, Uber relied on the safety driver  
 – who was unfortunately watching TV at the time1.

Now we’ve known for decades that relying on humans to take over in an

emergency takes time: a human has to react to an alarm, analyse the alarm  
 display on the console, scan the environment, acquire situational awareness, get  
 into the optical ﬂow, and take e↵ective control. Even in commercial aviation,  
 it takes a ﬂight crew about eight seconds to regain control properly after an  
 autopilot failure. You cannot expect a safety driver in a car to do much better.

**25.2.3** **The levels and limits of automation**

For such reasons, the Society of Automotive Engineers sets out ﬁve levels of  
 automation:

1. Driver assistance – the software controls either steering or speed, and the

human driver does the rest of the work;

2. Partial automation – the software controls both steering and speed in some

modes but the human driver is responsible for monitoring the environment  
 and assuming control at zero notice if the software gets confused;

3. Conditional automation – the software monitors the environment, and

controls both steering and speed, but assumes the human can take over if  
 it gets confused;

4. High automation – the software monitors the environment and drives the

car, in some driving conditions, without assuming that a human can in-  
 tervene. If it gets confused it stops at the side of the road;

5. Full automation – the software can do everything a human can.

So far, vehicles available on the mass market only have *advanced driver*

*assistance systems* (ADAS), namely levels one and two, and insurers consider  
 words like ‘autonomous’ and ‘autopilot’ to be dangerous as they cause customers  
 to assume that a vehicle is operating at Level 4, which can lead to accidents.  
 The Arizona crash can be seen as a car operating at Level 2 while the safety  
 driver operated at Level 3. Level 4 often assumes a backup driver sitting in  
 a control centre, overseeing several dozen ‘autonomous’ cars, but they won’t  
 have the bandwidth to understand a hazard as quickly as a safety driver on  
 the spot. They don’t feel the road noise and accelerations, they can’t use their  
 peripheral vision, and above all, they are not immersed in the optical ﬂow ﬁeld

1In fact, the very ﬁrst fatal crash involving a Tesla on autopilot claimed the life of a driver

who appeared to be watching a movie on his laptop when his car ran under a truck [1394].

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 785 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

that is critical to driving a car (or landing an aircraft) safely, as we discussed in  
 section 3.2.1.

To what extent is Level 5 feasible at all, unless we invent artiﬁcial general

intelligence? John Naughton remarked that a downtown delivery driver’s job  
 is pretty safe, as the work demands all sorts of judgment calls such as whether  
 you can double-park or even block a narrow street for half a minute while you  
 dash up to a doorway and drop a parcel, as the cars behind honk at you [1417].  
 Another hard case is the cluttered suburban street with cars parked either side,  
 where you are forever negotiating who goes ﬁrst with oncoming vehicles, using  
 a wave, a nod or even just eye contact. Even the current Level 2 systems tend  
 to have di�culty when turning across tra�c because of their inability to do this  
 tacit negotiation. They end up having to be much more cautious than a human  
 driver and wait for a bigger gap, which annoys human drivers behind them. And  
 if you’ve ever tried to ease a car through the hordes of students on bicycles in a  
 college town like Cambridge, or any urban tra�c in India, you know that dealing  
 with human tra�c complexity is hard in many other situations. Can your self-  
 driving car even detect hand signals from police o�cers to stop, let alone cope  
 with eight students carrying a bed, or with an Indian temple procession?

As of 2020, the Level 2 systems have lots of shortcomings. Tesla can’t always

detect stationary vehicles reliably; it uses vision, sonar and radar but no lidar.  
 (One Tesla driver in North Carolina has been charged after running into the  
 back of a stationary police car [1118].) The Range Rover can’t always detect the  
 boundary between a paved road and grass, but perhaps that wasn’t a priority for  
 a 4 x 4. Many cars have issues with little roundabouts, not to mention potholes  
 and other rough surfaces; the ﬁrst time I got a ride in one, my teeth were rattled  
 as we went over speed bumps at almost 30mph. Roadworks play havoc with  
 automatic lane-keeping systems, as old white lines that have been painted over  
 can be shiny black and very prominent in some light conditions, leading cars to  
 oscillate back and forth between old and new markings [632]. There’s a huge  
 amount of research on such technical topics, from better algorithms for multi-  
 sensor data fusion though driving algorithms that can provide an explanation  
 for their decisions, to getting cars to learn routes as they travel them, just like  
 humans do. Tesla even has a ‘shadow mode’ for its autopilot; when it’s not  
 in use, it still tries to predict what the driver will do next, and records its  
 mispredictions for later analysis. This has enabled Tesla to collect billions of  
 miles of training data across a vast range of road and weather conditions.

I’ll discuss safety assurance in section 28.4.1 but the state of play in 2020 is

that while Tesla and NHTSA claimed that there are fewer crashes after a Tesla  
 customer activates Autosteer, an independent lab claimed there were more. Now  
 as I discussed in section 14.3.1, falling asleep at the wheel is a major cause of  
 accidents, accounting for 20% of the UK total. These tend to be at the serious  
 end of the spectrum; they account for about 30% of fatal accidents and half  
 of fatal accidents on freeways. (That’s why we have laws to limit commercial  
 drivers’ hours.) So we ought to be able to save lives with a system that keeps  
 your car in lane on the freeway, brakes to avoid collisions, and brings it to a  
 stop at the side of the road if you don’t respond to chimes. Why is this not  
 happening?

I suspect we’ll need to disentangle at least three di↵erent factors: the risk

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 786 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

thermostat, the system’s a↵ordances, and the expectations created by mar-  
 keting. First, the risk thermostat is the mechanism whereby people adapt to  
 a perceived reduction in risk by adopting more risky behaviour; we noted in  
 section 3.2.5.7 that mandatory seat-belt laws caused people to drive faster, so  
 that the overall e↵ect was merely to move casualties from vehicle occupants to  
 pedestrians and cyclists, rather than to reduce their number overall. Second,  
 a↵ordances condition how we interact with technology, as we discussed in sec-  
 tion 3.2.1, and if a driver assistance system makes driving easier, and apparently  
 safer, people will relax and assume it is safer – disposing some of them to take  
 more risks. Third, the industry’s marketing minimises the risks in subtle ways.  
 For Tesla to call its autosteer feature an autopilot misled drivers to think they  
 could watch TV or have a nap. That is not the case with an autopilot on an  
 airplane, but most non-pilots don’t understand that.

**25.2.4** **How to hack a self-driving car**

The electronic security of road vehicles started out in the last century with  
 the truck tachographs and speed limiters we discussed in section 14.3 and the  
 remote key entry systems we discussed in section 4.3.1. It has become a specialist  
 discipline since about 2005, when the carmakers and tier-1 component vendors  
 started to hire experts. By 2008, people were working on tamper resistance for  
 engine control units: the industry had started using software to control engine  
 power output, so whether your car had 120 horsepower or 150 was down to a  
 software switch which people naturally tried to hack. The makers tried to stop  
 them. They claimed they were concerned about the environmental impact of  
 improperly tuned cars, but if you believe that, I have a bridge I’d like to sell  
 you.

In 2010, Karl Koscher and colleagues got the attention of academics by

showing how to hack a late-model Ford. Cars’ internal data communications  
 use a CAN bus which does not have strong authentication, so an attacker who  
 gets control of (say) the radio can escalate this access to operate the door locks  
 and the brakes [1085]. In 2015, Charlie Miller and Chris Valasek got the at-  
 tention of the press when they hacked a Jeep Cherokee containing a volunteer  
 journalist, over its mobile phone link, slowed the vehicle down and drove it o↵  
 the road [1316]. This compelled Chrysler to recall 1.4m vehicles for a software  
 patch, costing the company over $1bn. This ﬁnally got the industry’s attention.

There’s now a diverse community of people who hack cars and other vehicles.

There are hobbyists who want to tune their cars; there are garages who also want  
 to use third-party components and services; and there are farmers who want to  
 repair their tractors despite John Deere’s service monopoly, as I mentioned in  
 section 24.6. There are open-source software activists and safety advocates who  
 believe we’re all safer if everything is documented [1792]. And there are the  
 black hats too: intelligence agencies that want to spy on vehicle occupants and  
 thieves who just want to steal cars.

Car theft is currently the main threat model, and we discussed the meth-

ods used to defeat remote key entry and alarm systems in section 4.3.1. State  
 actors and others can take over the mobile phones embedded in cars, using the  
 techniques discussed in section 2.2.1. The phones, navigation and infotainment

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 787 | Ross Anderson |

*25.2. AUTONOMOUS AND REMOTELY-PILOTED VEHICLES*

systems are often poorly designed anyway – when you rent a car, or buy one  
 secondhand, you often see a previous user’s personal information, and we de-  
 scribed in section 22.3.3 how an app that enables you to track and unlock a  
 rental car let you continue to do this once the car had been rented to somebody  
 else.

So what else might go wrong, especially as cars become more autonomous?

A reasonable worst-case scenario might see a state actor, or perhaps an environ-  
 mental activist group, trying to scare the public by causing thousands of simul-  
 taneous road tra�c accidents. A remote exploit such as that on the Chrysler  
 Jeep might already do this. The CAN bus which most modern cars use for  
 internal data communications trusts all its nodes. If one of them is subverted  
 it might be reprogrammed to transmit continuously; such a ‘blethering idiot’,  
 as it’s called, makes the whole bus unusable. If this is the powertrain bus, the  
 car becomes almost undriveable; the driver will still have some steering control  
 but without power assistance to either steering or brakes. If the car is travelling  
 at speed, there’s a serious accident risk. The possibility that a malicious actor  
 could hack millions of cars causing tens of thousands of road tra�c accidents  
 simultaneously is unacceptable, and such vulnerabilities therefore have to be  
 patched. But patching is expensive. The average car might contain 50–100

electronic control units from 20 di↵erent vendors, and the integration testing  
 needed to get them to all work together smoothly is expensive. I’ll discuss this  
 in more detail in section 27.5.4.

Attacks are not limited to the cars themselves. In 2017, Elon Musk told

an audience, “In principle, if someone was able to say hack all the autonomous  
 Teslas, they could say – I mean just as a prank – they could say ‘send them all  
 to Rhode Island’ – across the United States ... and that would be the end of  
 Tesla and there would be a lot of angry people in Rhode Island.”. His audience  
 laughed, and three years later it emerged that he’d not been entirely joking. A  
 few months previously, a hacker had gained control of the Tesla ‘mothership’  
 server which controls its entire ﬂeet; luckily he was a white hat and reported  
 the hack to Tesla [1119]. At the other end of the scale, the performance artist  
 Simon Weckert pulled a handcart containing 99 Android phones around Berlin  
 in February 2020, causing Google Maps to register a tra�c jam wherever he  
 went [1997]. As advanced driver assistance systems rely ever more extensively  
 on cloud facilities, the scope for such indirect attacks will increase.

And external attacks need not involve computers. If car systems start to

slow down automatically for pedestrians and cyclists, some of them may exploit  
 this. In India and some parts of southern Europe, pedestrians walk through  
 congested tra�c, ﬂagging cars to stop, and they do; it will be interesting to see  
 if this behaviour appears in London and New York as well.

Companies will exploit assistance systems if they can. Now that the initial

dream of self-driving trucks seems some way o↵, and even the intermediate  
 dream of multiple trucks driving in convoy between distribution hubs with a  
 single driver seems ambitious, may we expect lobbying to relax the legal limits  
 on drivers’ hours? Trucking ﬁrms may argue that once the truck’s on autopilot  
 on the freeway, the driver only has to do real work on arrival and departure, so  
 he should work ten hours a shift rather than eight. But if the net e↵ect of the  
 technology is to make truck drivers work more time for the same money, it will

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 788 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

be resented and perhaps sabotaged.

Should Level 5 automation ever happen, even in restricted environments –

so that we ﬁnally see the robotaxis Google hoped to invent – then we’ll have  
 to think about social hacking as a facet of safety. If your 12-year-old daughter  
 calls a cab to get a ride home from school, then at present we have safeguards in  
 the form of laws requiring taxi drivers to have background checks for criminal  
 records. Uber tried to avoid these laws, claiming it wasn’t a taxi company but  
 a ‘platform’; in London, the mayor had to ban them and ﬁght them in court for  
 years to get them to comply. So how will safeguarding work with robotaxis?

There will also be liability games. At present, car companies try to blame

drivers for crashes, so each crash becomes a question of which driver was negli-  
 gent. If the computer was driving the car, though, that’s product liability, and  
 the manufacturer has to pay. There have been some interesting tussles around  
 the safety ﬁgures for assisted driving, and speciﬁcally whether the carmakers un-  
 dercount crashes with autopilot activated, which we’ll discuss in section 28.4.1.

So much is entirely predictable. But what about new attacks on the AI

components of the systems themselves? For example, can you confuse a car  
 by projecting a deceptive image on a bridge, or on the road, and cause it to  
 crash? That’s quite possible, and I’ve already seen a crash caused by visual  
 confusion. On the road home from my lab, there was a house at a right-hand  
 bend whose owner often parked his car facing oncoming tra�c. At night, in a  
 left-hand driving country like Britain, your driving reﬂex is to steer to the left  
 of the facing car, but then you’d notice you were heading for his garden wall,  
 and swerve right to pass to the right of his car instead. Eventually a large truck  
 didn’t swerve in time, and ended up in the wall.

So could clever software fool a machine vision system in new ways, or ways

that might be easier for an attacker to scale? That brings us to the next topic,  
 artiﬁcial intelligence, or to be more precise, machine learning.

**25.3** **AI / ML**

The phrase *artiﬁcial intelligence* has meant di↵erent things at di↵erent times.  
 For pioneers like Alan Turing, it ranged from the Turing test to attempts to  
 teach a computer to play chess. By the 1960s it meant text processing, from  
 Eliza to early machine translation, and programming in Lisp. In the 1980s there  
 was a surge of research spurred by Japan’s announcement of a huge research pro-  
 gramme into ‘Fifth generation computing’, with which Western nations scram-  
 bled to keep up; much of that e↵ort went into rule-based systems, and Prolog  
 joined Lisp as one of the languages on the computer science curriculum.

From the 1990s, the emphasis changed from handcrafted systems with lots of

rules to systems that learn from examples, now called *machine learning* (ML).  
 Early mechanisms included logistic regressions, support vector machines (SVMs)  
 and Bayesian classiﬁers; progress was driven by applications such as natural  
 language processing (NLP) and search. While the NLP community developed  
 custom methods, the typical approach to designing a payment fraud detector  
 or spam ﬁlter was to collect large amounts of training data, write custom code

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 789 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

to extract a number of signals, and just see empirically which type of classiﬁer  
 worked best on them. Search became intensely adversarial during the 2000s as  
 search engine optimisation ﬁrms used all sorts of tricks to manipulate the signals  
 on which search engines rely, and the engines fought back in turn, penalising or  
 banning sites that use underhand tricks such as hidden text. Bing was an early  
 user of ML, but Google avoided it for years; the engineer who ran search from  
 2000 until he retired in 2016, Amit Singhal, felt it was too hard to ﬁnd out, for  
 a given set of results, exactly which of the many inputs was most responsible for  
 which result. This made it hard to debug machine-learning based algorithms  
 for search ranking. If you detected a botnet clicking on restaurants in Istanbul  
 and wanted to tweak the algorithm to exclude them, it was easier to change a  
 few ‘if’ statements than retrain a classiﬁer [1300].

A sea change started in 2011 when Dan Cire¸san, Ueli Meier, Jonathan Masci

and J¨urgen Schmidhuber trained a deep convolutional neural network to do as  
 well as humans on recognising handwritten digits and Chinese characters, and  
 better than humans on tra�c signs [435]. The following year, Alex Krizhevsky,  
 Ilya Sutskever and Geo↵ Hinton used a similar *deep neural network* (DNN) to  
 get record-breaking results at classifying 1.2 million images [1098]. The race was  
 on, other researchers piled in, and ‘deep learning’ started to get serious traction  
 at a variety of tasks. The most spectacular result came in 2016 when David  
 Silver and colleagues at Google Deepmind produced AlphaGo, which defeated  
 the world Go champion Lee Sedol [1737]. This got the attention of the world.  
 Before then, few research students wanted to study machine learning; since then  
 few want to study anything else. Undergraduates even pay attention in classes  
 on probability and statistics, which were previously seen as a chore.

**25.3.1** **ML and security**

The interaction between machine learning and security goes back to the mid-  
 1990s. Malware writers started using tricks such as polymorphism to evade the  
 classiﬁers in anti-virus software, as I described in section 21.3.5; banks and credit  
 card companies started using machine learning to detect payment fraud, as I  
 described in section 12.5.4; and phone companies also used it for ﬁrst-generation  
 mobiles, as I noted in section 22.2. The arrival of spam as the Internet opened  
 up to the public in the mid-1990s created a market for spam ﬁlters. Hand-

crafted rules didn’t scale well enough for large mail service providers, especially  
 once botnets appeared and spam became the majority of email, so spam ﬁltering  
 became a big application.

Alice Hutchings, Sergo Pastrana and Richard Clayton surveyed the use of

machine-learning in such systems, and the tricks the bad guys have worked out  
 to dupe them [939]. As spam ﬁltering takes user feedback as its ground truth,  
 spammers learned to send spam to accounts they control at the big webmail  
 ﬁrms, and mark it ‘not spam’; other statistical analysis mechanisms are now  
 used to detect this. Poisoning a classiﬁer’s training data is a quite general

attack. Another is to look for weak points in a value chain: airline ticket

fraudsters buy an innocuous ticket, pass the fraud checks, and then change  
 it just before departure to a ticket to a high-risk destination. And there are  
 vigorous discussions of such techniques on the underground forums where the

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 790 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

bad actors trade not just services but boasts and tips. Battista Biggio and

Fabio Rolli give more technical background: in 2004, spammers found they  
 could confuse the early linear classiﬁers in spam ﬁlters by varying some of the  
 words, and an arms race took o↵ from there [241].

It turns out that these attack ideas generalise to other systems, and there

are other attacks too.

**25.3.2** **Attacks on ML systems**

There are at least four types of attack on a machine-learning system.

First, you can poison the training data. If the model continues to train itself

in use, then it might be simple to lead it astray. Tay was a chatbot released by  
 Microsoft in March 2016 on Twitter; trolls immediately started teaching it to  
 use racist and o↵ensive language, and it was shut down after only 16 hours.

Second, you can attack the model’s integrity in its inference phase, for ex-

ample by causing it to give the wrong answer. In 2013, Christian Szegedy and  
 colleagues found that the deep neural networks which had been found to classify  
 images so well in 2012 were vulnerable to *adversarial samples* – images per-  
 turbed very slightly would be wildly misclassiﬁed [1857]. The idea is to choose  
 a perturbation that maximises the model’s prediction error. It turns out that  
 neural networks have plenty of such blind spots, which are related to the train-  
 ing data in non-obvious ways. The decision space is high-dimensional, which  
 makes blind spots mathematically inevitable [1706]; and with neural networks  
 the decision boundaries are convoluted, making them non-obvious. Researchers  
 quickly came up with real-world adversarial examples, ranging from small stick-  
 ers that would cause a car vision system to misread a 30mph speed sign as  
 60mph, to coloured spectacles that would cause a man wearing them to be mis-  
 recognised as a woman, or not recognised at all [1720]. In the world of malware  
 detection, people found that non-linear classiﬁers such as SVM and deep neural  
 networks were not actually harder to evade than linear classiﬁers provided you  
 did it right [241].

Third, Florian Tram`er and colleagues showed that you can attack the model’s

conﬁdentiality in the inference phase, by getting it to classify a number of probe  
 inputs and building a successively better approximation. The result is often  
 a good working imitation of the target model. As in the manufacture of real  
 goods, a knock-o↵ is often cheaper; big models can cost a lot to train from  
 scratch. This approximation attack works not just with neural networks but  
 also with other classiﬁers such as logistic regression and decision trees [1901].

What’s more, many attacks turn out to be transferable, so an attacker

doesn’t need full access to the model (a so-called *white-box attack*) [1900]. Many  
 attacks can be developed on one model and then launched against another that’s  
 been trained on the same data, or even just similar data (a *black-box attack*).  
 The blind spots are a function of the training data, so in order to make attacks  
 less transferable you have to make an e↵ort. For example, Ilia Shumailov, Yiren  
 Zhao, Robert Mullins and I have experimented with inserting keys in neural  
 networks so that the blind spots appear in di↵erent places, and models with  
 di↵erent keys are vulnerable to di↵erent adversarial samples [1733]. Kerckho↵s’

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 791 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

principle applies in machine learning, as almost everywhere else in security.

A variant on the conﬁdentiality attack is to extract sensitive training data.

Large neural networks contain a lot of state, and the simplest way to deal with  
 outliers is often just to memorise them. So if some business claims that a

classiﬁer trained on a million medical records is not personal data because it’s  
 “statistical machine learning”, take care. Ways of combining machine learning  
 with di↵erential privacy, which we discussed in section 11.3, are a subject of  
 active research [1493].

Finally, you can deny service, and one way is to choose samples that will

cause the classiﬁer to take as long as possible. Ilia Shumailov and colleagues  
 found that one can often deny service by posing a conundrum to a classiﬁer.  
 Given a straight-through pipeline, as in a typical image-processing task, a con-  
 fusing image can take 20% more time, but in more complex tasks such as natural  
 language processing you can invoke exception handling and slow things down  
 hundreds of times [1730].

More complex attacks straddle these categories. For example, there’s an

arms race between online advertisers and the suppliers of ad-blocking software,  
 and as the advertisers adopt ever more complicated ways of rendering web pages  
 to confuse the blockers, the blockers are starting to use image processing tech-  
 niques on the rendered page to spot ads. However this leaves them open to  
 advertisers using adversarial samples either to escape the ﬁlter, or to cause it to  
 wrongly block another part of the page [1899].

So how can one use machine learning safely in the real world? That’s some-

thing we’re still learning, but there are some things we can say. First, one has  
 to take a systems security approach and look at the problem end-to-end. Just  
 as we sanitise inputs to web services, do penetration testing, and have mech-  
 anisms for responsible disclosure and update, we need to do the same for ML  
 systems [659].

Second, we need to draw on the experience of the last twenty years’ work

on topics like card fraud, spam and intrusion detection. As we mentioned in  
 section 21.4.2.2, ML systems have been largely ine↵ective at real-world network  
 intrusion detection; Robin Sommer and Vern Paxson were the ﬁrst to give a good  
 explanation why. They discuss the lack of training data, the distance between  
 theory and practice, the di�culties in evaluation, the high cost of errors and  
 above all the inability to deal with novel attacks [1802]. The problem of keeping  
 capable opponents out of complex corporate networks just isn’t one that artiﬁcial  
 intelligence has ever been good at.

There may occasionally be a change in emphasis, though. If we want to

lower the probability of a new adversarial attack causing real damage, there are  
 various things we can do, depending on the context. One is simply to detune  
 the classiﬁer; this is the approach in at least one machine-vision system used  
 in cars. By making it less sensitive, you make it less easy to spoof, and then  
 you complement it with other sensors such as radar and ultrasonics so that the  
 vision system on its own is less critical. An alternative approach is to head in the  
 other direction, by making the ML component of your system su�ciently fragile  
 that an attack can be detected by other components – whereupon you switch  
 to a defensive mode of operation, such as a low-sensitivity limp-home mode or

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 792 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

stopping and waiting for a human to drive. In other words, you set out to build  
 in situational awareness. This is how we behave in real life; as I discussed in  
 section 3.2.5.1, the ancestral evolutionary environment taught us to take extra  
 care when we sense triggers such as adversarial intent and violations of tribal  
 taboos. So we’ve experimented with using neural networks trained so that a  
 number of outputs and activations are considered to be taboo and avoided; if  
 any of these taboos is broken, an attack can be suspected [1733].

The fundamental problem is that once we start letting machine learning blur

the boundary between code and data, and systems become data-driven, people  
 are going to game them. This brings us to the thorny problem of the interaction  
 of machine learning and society.

**25.3.3** **ML and society**

The surge of interest in machine learning since 2016, and its representation as  
 ‘artiﬁcial intelligence’ in the popular press, has led to a lot of speculation about  
 ethics. For example, the philosopher Dan Dennett objects on moral grounds  
 to the existence of persons that are immortal and intelligent but not conscious.  
 But companies already meet that deﬁnition! The history of corporate wrongdo-  
 ing shows that corporations can behave very badly indeed (we discussed some  
 examples in section 12.2.6). The most powerful ML systems belong to corpora-  
 tions such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft and IBM, all of which have had tussles  
 with authority. The interplay between ML, big data and monopoly adds to the  
 thicket of issues that governments need to navigate as they ponder how to reg-  
 ulate tech. One aspect is that the tech majors’ ML o↵erings are now becoming  
 platforms on their own, and used by lots of startups solving speciﬁc real-world  
 problems [658].

One cross-cutting issue is prejudice. Aylin Caliskan, a Turkish research

student at Princeton, noticed that machine translations from Turkish to English  
 came out with gender bias; although Turkish has no grammatical gender, the  
 English translations of Turkish sentences would assign doctors as ‘he’ and nurses  
 as ‘she’. On further investigation, she and her supervisors Joanna Bryson and  
 Arvind Narayanan found that essentially all machine translation systems in  
 use were not merely sexist, but racist and homophobic too [369]. In fact a

large number of natural-language systems based on machine learning inhale the  
 prejudices of their training data. If the big platforms’ ML engines can su↵use  
 prejudice through the systems on which hundreds of downstream ﬁrms rely,  
 there is deﬁnitely a public-policy issue.

A related policy problem is *redlining*. When insurance companies used

postcode-level claim statistics to decide the level of premiums, it was found  
 that many minority areas su↵ered high premiums or were excluded from cover,  
 breaking anti-discrimination laws. I wrote in the second edition of this book in  
 2008: “If you build an intrusion detection system based on data mining tech-  
 niques, you are at serious risk of discriminating. If you use neural network

techniques, you’ll have no way of explaining to a court what the rules underly-  
 ing your decisions are, so defending yourself could be hard. Opaque rules can  
 also contravene European data protection law, which entitles citizens to know  
 the algorithms used to process their personal data.”

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 793 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

A second cross-cutting issue is snake oil, and the AI/ML gold rush has led

to thousands of startups, many of them stronger on marketing than on prod-  
 uct. Manish Raghavan and colleagues surveyed ‘AI’ systems used in employment  
 screening and hiring, ﬁnding dozens of ﬁrms that claim their systems match new  
 hires to the company’s requirements. Most claim they don’t discriminate, yet  
 as few employers retain comprehensive and accessible data on employee perfor-  
 mance, it’s entirely unclear how such systems can even be trained, let alone how  
 a ﬁrm that used such a system might defend a lawsuit for discrimination [1571].  
 Applicants quickly learn to game the system, such as by slipping the word ‘Ox-  
 ford’ or ‘Cambridge’ into their CV in white text. A prudent employer would  
 demand more transparent mechanisms, and devise independent metrics to vali-  
 date their outcomes. Even that is nontrivial, as machine learning can discover  
 correlations that we do not understand.

Arvind Narayanan has an interesting analysis of snake oil in AI [1382]. ‘AI’

and even ‘ML’ are generic terms for a whole grab-bag of technologies. Some  
 of them have made real progress, like DNNs for face recognition, and indeed  
 AlphaGo. So companies exploit this hype, slapping the ‘AI’ label on whatever  
 they’re selling, even if its mechanisms use statistical techniques from a century  
 ago. Digging deeper, Arvind argues that machine-learning systems can be sorted  
 into three categories:

1. ML has made real progress on tasks of *perception*, such as face recognition

(see section 17.3), the recognition of songs by products like Shazam (see  
 section 24.4.3), medical diagnosis from scans, and speech-to-text – at all  
 of which it has acquired the competence of skilled humans;

2. ML has made some progress on tasks of *judgment*, such as content recom-

mendation and the recognition of spam and hate speech. These have many  
 hard edge cases about which even skilled humans disagree. The systems  
 that perform them often rely on substantial human input – from a billion  
 email users clicking the ‘report spam’ button to the tens of thousands of  
 content moderators employed by the big tech companies;

3. ML has made no progress on tasks of *social prediction*, such as predicting

employee performance, school outcomes and future criminal behaviour.  
 A very extensive study by Matthew Sagalnik and over 400 collaborators  
 has concluded that insofar as life outcomes can be predicted at all, this  
 can be done as well using simple linear regressions based on a handful of  
 variables [1638].

This is a falsiﬁable claim, so we’ll see how accurate it is over time, and if

there’s a fourth edition of this book in 2030 we’ll have a lot more data then. A  
 major theme of research meanwhile will be to look for better ways for people and  
 machines to work together. Intuitively, we want people to do the jobs involving  
 judgment and machines to do the boring stu↵; but making that actually work  
 can be harder than it looks. Often people end up being the machine’s servants,  
 and according to one VC ﬁrm, 40% of ‘AI’ startups don’t actually use ML in  
 any material way; they’re merely riding the wave of hype and employ people  
 behind the scenes [1960]. One way or another, there will be lots of bumps in  
 the road, and lots of debates about ethics and politics.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 794 | Ross Anderson |

*25.3. AI / ML*

Perhaps the best way to approach the ethics is this. Many of the problems

now being discussed in the context of AI ethics arose years ago for research  
 done using traditional statistical methods on databases of personal information.  
 (Indeed, linear regressions have been used continuously for about a century;  
 they’ve just been rebranded as machine learning.) So our ﬁrst port of call

should be existing law and policy. When we discussed ethics in the context of  
 records-based health and social-policy research in section 10.4.5.1, we observed  
 that many of the issues arose because IT companies and their customers ignored  
 the wisdom that doctors, teachers and others had accumulated over years of  
 dealing with paper-based records. The same mistakes are now being repeated,  
 and excused as before with sales hype around ‘innovation’ and ‘disruption’.

In the case of predicting which children are likely to turn to crime, it’s

been known for years that such indicators can be deeply stigmatising. In sec-  
 tion 10.4.6 we noted that if you tell teachers which kids have had contact with  
 social services, then the teachers will have lower expectations of them. Both  
 child welfare and privacy law argue against sharing such indicators. How much  
 more harmful might it be if clueless administrators buy software that claims  
 to be making predictions using the inscrutable magic that enabled AlphaGo to  
 beat Lee Sedol? As for ‘predictive policing’, studies suggest that it might just  
 be another way to get the computer to justify a policy of ‘round up the usual  
 suspects’ [677]. (In section 14.4 we discussed how curfew tags also have this ef-  
 fect.) Similar issues arise with the use of ML techniques to advise judges in bail  
 hearings about whether a suspect poses a ﬂight risk or reo↵ending risk, and also  
 in sentencing hearings about whether a suspect is dangerous. Such technologies  
 are likely to propagate existing social biases and power structures, and provide  
 lawmakers with an excuse to continue ine↵ective but populist policies, rather  
 than nudging them to tackle the underlying problems.

ML is nonetheless likely to upset some of the equilibria that have emerged

over the years on issues like surveillance, privacy and censorship, as it makes  
 even more powerful tools available to already powerful actors, as well as creating  
 new excuses to revive old abuses. Many countries already restrict the use of  
 CCTV cameras; now that face-recognition systems enable pedestrians to be  
 recognised, do we need to restrict them more? As we saw in section 17.3, a  
 number of cities (including San Francisco) have decided the answer is ‘yes’.  
 In section 11.2.5 we discussed how location and social data can now make it  
 very hard to be anonymous, and how people’s Facebook data could be mined  
 for political ad targeting. ML techniques make it easier to do tra�c analysis,  
 by spotting patterns of communication [1719]; in fact, police and intelligence  
 agencies depend ever more on tra�c and social-network analysis of the sort  
 discussed in sections 21.7, 23.3.1 and 26.2.2.

In short, the charge sheet against machine learning is that it is one of the

technologies helping entrench the power of the tech majors while pushing the  
 balance between privacy and surveillance towards surveillance and facilitating  
 authoritarian government in other ways. It may be telling that Google and

Microsoft are funding big research programs to develop AI for social good.

So what can we do as a practical matter to get some privacy in this electronic

village in which we now live?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 795 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

**25.4** **PETS and operational security**

Even if you don’t blurt out all your thoughts on Facebook, social structure –  
 who hangs out with whom – says an awful lot, and has become much more  
 visible. In section 11.2.5 we discussed research which suggested that as few as  
 four Facebook likes enable a careful observer to work out whether you’re straight  
 or gay most of the time, and how this observation led among other things to  
 the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where voters’ preferences were documented  
 covertly and in detail.

Even if you don’t use Facebook at all, the tra�c data on who contacted whom

gives a lot away to those who have access to it, as we discussed in section 11.4.1.  
 This can cause problems for people who are in conﬂict with authority, such as  
 whistleblowers. Anonymity can sometimes be a useful tool here. The abuse of  
 academic authority is countered by anonymous student feedback on professors  
 and anonymous refereeing of conference paper submissions. If your employer  
 pays your health insurance, you might want to buy an HIV test kit for cash  
 and get the results anonymously online, as the mere fact that you took a test  
 says something, even if the result is negative. Privacy can also be a necessary  
 precursor of free speech. People trying to innovate in politics or religion may  
 need to develop their doctrine and build their numbers before going public. And  
 then there are opposition politicians digging a bear trap for the government of  
 the day, whose concerns are more tactical.

The importance of such activities to an open society is such that we consider

privacy and freedom of speech to be interlinked human rights. We also enact  
 laws to protect whistleblowers. But how can this work out in practice?

In pre-technological societies, two people could walk a short distance away

from everyone else and have a conversation that left no hard evidence of what  
 was said. If Alice claimed that Bob had criticised the king, then Bob could  
 always claim the converse – that it was Alice who’d proposed a demonstration  
 to increase the powers of parliament and he who’d refused out of loyalty.

In other words, many communications were *deniable*. Plausible deniability

remains an important feature of some communications today, from everyday life  
 up to the highest reaches of intelligence and diplomacy. It can sometimes be  
 ﬁxed by convention: for example, a litigant in England can write a letter marked  
 ‘without prejudice’ to another proposing a settlement, and this letter cannot be  
 used in evidence. But most circumstances lack such clear and convenient rules,  
 and the electronic nature of communication often means that ‘just stepping  
 outside for a minute’ isn’t an option. What then?

A related issue is anonymity. Until the industrial revolution, most people

lived in small villages, and it was a relief – in fact a revolution – to move into  
 a town. You could change your religion, or vote for a land-reform candidate,  
 without your landlord throwing you o↵ your farm. In a number of ways, the  
 e↵ect of the Internet has been to take us back to an ‘electronic village’: electronic  
 communications have not only shrunk distance, but in some ways our freedom  
 too.

Can technology help? To make things a bit more concrete, let’s consider

some people with speciﬁc privacy problems.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 796 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

1. Andrew is a missionary in Texas whose website has attracted a number of

converts in Iran. That country executes Muslim citizens who change their  
 religion. He suspects that some of the people who’ve contacted him aren’t  
 real converts, but religious policemen hunting for apostates. He can’t tell  
 a policeman apart from a real convert. What sort of technology should he  
 use to communicate privately with converts?

2. Bella is your ten-year-old daughter, who’s been warned by her teacher to

remain anonymous online. What sort of training should you give her?

3. Charles is a psychoanalyst who sees private patients su↵ering from depres-

sion, anxiety and other problems. Previously he practised in a nondescript  
 house in town which his patients could visit discreetly. Since lockdown,  
 he’s had to use tools like Skype and Zoom. What’s prudent practice to  
 protect patient privacy?

4. Dai is a human-rights worker in Vietnam, in contact with people trying

to set up independent trade unions, microﬁnance cooperatives and the  
 like. The police harass her frequently. How should she communicate with  
 colleagues?

5. Elizabeth works as an analyst for an investment bank that’s advising on a

merger. She wants ways of investigating a takeover target without letting  
 the target get wind of her interest – or even learn that anybody at all is  
 interested. Her opponents are people like her at other ﬁrms.

6. Firoz is a gay man who lives in Tehran, where being gay is a capital o↵ence.

He’d like some way to download porn and perhaps contact other gay men  
 without getting hanged.

7. Graziano is a magistrate in Palermo setting up a hotline to let people

tip o↵ the authorities about Maﬁa activity. He knows that some of the  
 cops who sta↵ the o�ce in future will be in the Maﬁa’s pay – and that  
 potential informants know this too. How does he limit the damage that  
 corrupt cops can do?

8. Hristo helps refugees enter the UK so they can claim asylum. Most of

his clients are ﬂeeing wars or bad government in the Middle East and  
 North Africa. He operates from Belgium and gets clients into trucks or  
 on to speedboats depending on the weather. He needs to coordinate with  
 colleagues in France, Britain and elsewhere. How can they do this despite  
 surveillance from assorted security and intelligence agencies?

9. Irene is an investigative journalist on a combative newspaper who invites

whistleblowers to contact her. She dreams of landing the next Ed Snow-  
 den. What preparations should she make in case she does get contacted  
 by a major source that the government would try hard to unmask?

10. Justin is running for elected o�ce. Irene would happily dig the dirt on

his family; and there are many other people who want to read his email,  
 send a racist tweet from his social media account, or wire his campaign  
 war chest to North Korea. How can he frustrate them?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 797 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

Privacy isn’t just about encrypting messages. If Andrew tells his converts

to download and use Wickr, then the police spies pretending to be converts will  
 get the national ﬁrewall to detect anyone who uses it. Andrew has to make his  
 tra�c look innocuous – so that the police can’t spot converts even when they  
 know what apostate tra�c looks like. If only a few dozen people use Wickr, the  
 police can just break all their doors down. So it’s not just about whether Wickr  
 is a more secure product than Signal or Skype, but how many people in that  
 country use it.

And while technical measures may solve part of Andrew’s problem, they

won’t be much use with Bella’s. One risk to children is that they’ll say something  
 careless that may embarrass them later. Another is that political and media  
 scaremongering about child safety gets in the way of their welfare. Most of your  
 e↵ort will go into educating her. As Bella grows up, she’ll have to become adept  
 with the tools the rest of her peer group use; and soon enough she’ll adopt  
 her security procedures from them more than from you. You have to impart  
 understanding, not rituals.

The intensity of attacks will vary widely. Andrew and Firoz might face only

sporadic interest, while Graziano, Hristo and Justin have capable motivated  
 opponents. As for Dai, she’s frequently put under surveillance. She’s not using  
 anonymous communications to protect herself, but to protect others who haven’t  
 come to the police’s attention yet.

There are radically di↵erent incentives. Andrew, Charles, Dai, Graziano and

Irene go to some trouble to protect vulnerable people they deal with, while the  
 sites in which Firoz is interested don’t care much about his safety. Andrew,  
 Dai, Graziano and Hristo all have to think about dishonest insiders. In Justin’s  
 case it’s careless insiders: the juicy stu↵ that the Russians would like to give to  
 Irene lives in the personal accounts of his campaign volunteers, as well as in the  
 personal accounts of friends and family who’re hard to include in any organised  
 defensive e↵ort.

There are di↵erent thresholds for success and failure. Hristo can only be

jailed if the police prove a case against him beyond reasonable doubt; Irene can  
 take down Justin if she can defend a libel suit on the balance of the evidence;  
 while mere suspicion could be bad news for Elizabeth or Firoz. And there are  
 di↵erent costs of failure: Elizabeth might lose some money if she screws up,  
 while Justin could lose his career and Firoz could lose his life.

We discussed in section 22.2.1 how people who don’t want their phone calls

traced buy prepaid mobile phones, use them for a while, and throw them away.  
 But these *burners*, as they’re sometimes called, are hard to use properly; even  
 Al-Qaida couldn’t do it right. So what’s the state of play for hard privacy

online?

**25.4.1** **Anonymous messaging devices**

As we discussed in section 2.2.1.10, investigators often get much of their informa-  
 tion from tra�c analysis. Regardless of whether people use email, a messaging  
 service or the plain old telephone service, access to the social graph lets police-  
 men map out friendship networks – and the marketers do this too when they

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 798 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

can get their hands on it [598]. In the old days, encrypting your email tra�c  
 could be dangerous; if you were one of only 20 people in the country using PGP,  
 that made you a suspect. It’s more complex now that most people use webmail  
 services that are TLS encrypted by default, but the same principles apply.

People under government surveillance like Hristo learned that normal privacy

apps like WhatsApp or Signal aren’t enough on their own, even if lots of other  
 people use them for innocuous purposes. Suppose Hristo uses Signal to arrange  
 for Kevan to bring eight people across the English Channel in a speedboat. But  
 if a Royal Navy cutter arrests Kevan and they ﬁnd Hristo’s messages on his  
 phone, he faces extradition. If Kevan, or Hristo, also uses their phone to chat  
 with their family, it might help the police to map their network using tra�c  
 analysis. There’s not just an issue of making networks hard to trace, but about  
 what evidence can be seized when people are caught. Similar problems are faced  
 by Dai and by Graziano’s undercover operatives.

So we’ve seen the development of a market for ‘crypto phones’ which not only

provide encrypted messaging, but try to support *operational security* (Opsec)  
 as well. We discussed Opsec in the corporate context in section 3.3.4, but it  
 matters even more here. The ﬁrst crypto phone on general sale was proba-

bly Silent Circle’s Blackphone in 2014, which was sold to government agencies,  
 special forces and human-rights workers. There have since been a number of  
 competing systems. Ed Caesar describes some of the people who promoted

crypto phone businesses out of the Cyberbunker in Germany, which was the  
 country’s biggest hoster of illegal web sites until it was raided and shut down in  
 September 2019 [364]. The handsets are typically modiﬁed so you can’t run apps  
 (which could spy on you); they may have the microphone and camera disabled  
 so GCHQ can’t turn them into monitoring devices; GPS may also be disabled;  
 they can’t be read out by standard police forensic kiosks; and they’re part of a  
 closed system consisting of both phones and messaging servers where you don’t  
 identify the other party by a phone number but by a user ID. Crypto phone  
 ﬁrms found that some people were prepared to pay over a thousand dollars or  
 Euros for a handset, and the same again for a six-monthly subscription to the  
 associated service. The market includes all sorts of people, from cryptocurrency  
 operators and spies through money launderers to drug dealers. Network e↵ects  
 apply in covert communities too; Hristo, Kevan and the rest of the gang all need  
 to use the same system. And as some people smugglers also smuggle drugs, and  
 some smugglers make enough money to need fancy tax accountants who also  
 work for the cryptocurrency crowd, network e↵ects can drag in all sorts of people  
 who seek privacy from state surveillance for reasons both good and bad.

The emerging pattern is that, thanks to network e↵ects, one crypto phone

system gets used ever more widely, until enough of its users are police targets  
 and the authorities bust it. For the beneﬁt of non-UK readers, I might mention  
 here that newspapers of the left and right see Hristo and his human cargo  
 in somewhat di↵erent terms. While some immigrant communities see Hristo’s  
 operation as a family reuniﬁcation service, the conservative press stigmatises  
 refugees and ministers have made immigration o↵ences a higher priority for  
 the agencies than organised acquisitive crime. So what can Hristo buy to keep  
 GCHQ o↵ his back?

Until 2016, the market leader was Ennetcom, a Dutch company which used

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 799 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

a private network of messaging servers in Canada to support anonymous user  
 IDs. In April of that year, the Dutch and Canadian authorities raided them and  
 arrested the owner, who had been involved with CyberBunker. In 2017, it was  
 the turn of PGP Safe; four Dutchmen were arrested [1081]. The following year,  
 the Dutch police also claimed to have broken a cryptophone system called Iron  
 Chat [792]. In 2018, the market leader was a company called Phantom Secure;  
 the US, Australian and the Canadian authorities closed down that system [1133].  
 Its CEO Vincent Ramos pleaded guilty to supplying the phones to drug dealers  
 worldwide, and at his sentencing hearing, prosecutors read out a message he sent  
 to colleagues: “We are f–ing rich man ... get the f–ing Range Rover brand new.  
 Cuz I just closed a lot of business. This week man. Sinaloa cartel, that’s what’s  
 up” [278]. He got nine years in jail. The next market leader, EncroChat, used  
 modiﬁed Android phones. In 2020, the French and Dutch police hacked its main  
 server and infected all 50,000 devices in use worldwide with law-enforcement  
 malware that copied their messages in real time to the police. On June 13th,  
 EncroChat realised they’d been hacked and advised their customers to get rid of  
 their phones at once [1922]. Hundreds of arrests followed all over Europe [572].

So policemen like Graziano have a standard playbook for taking down crypto

phone systems. But he may also use them to protect those of his sources who  
 remain emplaced in the gangs and in the communities in which they swim.  
 Indeed, when PGP ﬁrst came out in the 1990s, it was adopted by the Provisional  
 IRA in their insurgency against British rule in Northern Ireland. Up till then, a  
 big headache for the police had been making unobtrusive regular contact with  
 IRA informers, who lived in a nationalist community that hated the police and  
 where informers were killed. PGP made contact easy. An informer simply had  
 to tell his handler his private key, and the cops could collect all his tra�c. He  
 could even report in by sending an encrypted email to himself.

**25.4.2** **Social support**

The journalist Irene probably has the hardest task. If she’s approached by a  
 senior civil servant who wants to spill the beans on the government’s latest folly,  
 then as soon as the story appears the ‘mole hunt’ will begin. Her informant –  
 let’s call her Liz – will now be hunted by the police and intelligence apparatus.  
 How can Irene help Liz minimise the probability of being identiﬁed, ﬁred, and  
 prosecuted? We discussed whistleblowing brieﬂy in section 2.3.6, where we saw  
 that technical security is usually only one of the problems facing a whistleblower  
 – and often not the most serious.

The big problem is establishing trust, and that is a two-sided process. Irene

will need to assess Liz as a source. Does she have a real story to tell? Why’s  
 she telling it? Is it a semi-authorised leak, which she’s o↵ering with the tacit  
 approval of her minister as part of a political game? Can her story be stood  
 up with enough evidence, in case someone sues for libel? Is it a provocation,  
 designed to discredit Irene or the newspaper she works for? Is Liz vulnerable,  
 and in need of emotional support? When the story comes out, who else could  
 have leaked it? If a hundred people could have leaked it, you can talk about  
 anonymity; if the anonymity set size is only ten, you’re talking more about  
 plausible deniability, and Irene will want to talk to Liz about what happens

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 800 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

when the PM’s goons interrogate her. But in many cases the whistleblower

will be completely exposed once the story comes out. For example, if Liz’s

complaint is that a minister tried to rape her, then the conversation with Irene  
 will be about getting support and about whether people will believe her, rather  
 than about how to use Signal.

So best practice is for Irene to meet Liz in person as soon as possible after

Liz makes contact. If Liz may be targeted by state actors, but has a reasonable  
 chance of staying anonymous, Irene can give her a burner phone to establish a  
 chain of contact that’s independent of her existing home and work devices. If  
 Liz is one of ten suspects after the story breaks and the Prime Minister starts  
 shouting at the Director of the Security Service, then she’d better assume that  
 all ten of them will have all their known devices compromised by tea-time.

When Ed Snowden decided to blow the whistle on illegal surveillance, he

initially had di�culty getting a journalist to use PGP encryption. Afterwards,  
 many newspapers rushed to provide technical means for whistleblowers to con-  
 tact them, publishing PGP keys, the mobile numbers of journalists who use  
 Signal, and a facility called SecureDrop that enables people to upload ﬁles.  
 Mansoor Ahmed-Rengers, Darija Halatova, Ilia Shumailov and I did a study of  
 such mechanisms and found they su↵er from two types of problem [31]. First,  
 such mechanisms are hard to use. We discussed in section 3.2.1 how security  
 usability research started from the di�culty of using PGP, and the problem is  
 still there. Second, a whistleblower needs to understand the hazards in order to  
 devise sensible operational security procedures, but a typical newspaper doesn’t  
 discuss them the way that, for example, this chapter does. So Irene might want  
 to give Liz not just a burner phone but a training session on how to use tools  
 like Tails and Tor to upload ﬁles to SecureDrop2. (A crypto phone would be  
 more usable but Irene probably doesn’t have the budget, and if Liz were caught  
 with one, it could be a giveaway.)

It would be a mistake, though, to think of Liz as Irene’s typical source. Most

whistleblowers are in an anonymity set of size one, and their disclosures are not  
 about state secrets but about fraud and abuse. In section 12.2.6 we saw that  
 whistleblowers stopped more of the really serious fraud than either auditors or  
 regulators. But often a decision to expose wrongdoing may carry some personal  
 cost, such as getting ﬁred or being stigmatised. Social support is often the key.  
 It was only after several women who’d been raped by Harvey Weinstein found  
 the courage to speak out that dozens of others came forward too.

Support is critical for many of our other users, too. Charles the psycho-

analyst knows that the privacy he can o↵er his patient, whom we might call  
 Mary, is essential to the therapeutic work. The move from an o�ce to video-  
 conferencing not only creates some (small) actual risks but makes privacy less  
 comprehensible to both, undermining its role as a facilitator in therapy. Mary  
 might be afraid that if her employer discovers she’s having therapy, she might  
 be stigmatised by colleagues or passed over for promotion. In most cases the

2Even then, there’s lots more a journalist ought to be aware of, such as the machine

identiﬁcation codes that modern printers embed in documents and which we discussed in  
 section 24.4.3. They were used to trace Reality Winner, an NSA whistleblower who leaked  
 an NSA document describing Russian interference in the 2016 election and got 63 months  
 jail [174].

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 801 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

fear will be much greater than the actual risk, but sometimes the risk could be  
 real: she might be Dai, or Irene, or Liz. So the therapeutic environment must  
 calm her and inspire conﬁdence. Charles cannot start o↵ the relationship with  
 a detailed brieﬁng on opsec of the kind that Irene might give Liz at their ﬁrst  
 meeting. Privacy advice, if any, may have to be drip-fed along with the rest of  
 the support.

When dealing with children such as Bella, the priority is also providing a

calm and reassuring environment in which they can learn and develop. Sensible  
 parents will see through the scaremongering around child safety; the rate at  
 which children are abducted and murdered by strangers is about one in ten  
 million population per year, a rate so low that rational people will ignore it.  
 Your mission as a parent is to help your children grow into empowered citizens,  
 not to train them to cower from imaginary monsters.

Dai, the activist, is also a giver of support, to the people she’s trying to

recruit. Her case is much more tricky than Charles’s because the authorities are  
 trying to stop her being e↵ective. I assume she’s known to the authorities and  
 under intermittent surveillance.

Human-rights workers such as Dai do indeed use common tools such as

Skype, Tails, Tor and PGP to protect their tra�c, but the attacks to which  
 they’re subjected are not just technical; they’re the stu↵ of spy novels. The  
 police enter their homes covertly to implant rootkits that sni↵ passwords, and  
 room bugs to listen to conversations. When they encrypt a phone call, they have  
 to wonder whether the secret police are getting one side of it (or both) from  
 a hidden microphone. Sometimes the microphone isn’t all that hidden; we’ve  
 heard from activists of the police standing openly outside their house pointing  
 a shotgun mike at the window.

Countering such attacks requires tradecraft in turn. Some of this is just like

in spy movies: leaving telltales to detect covert entry, keeping your laptop with  
 you at all times, and holding sensitive conversations in places that are hard  
 to bug. Other aspects of it are di↵erent: human-rights workers (like journal-  
 ists but unlike spies) need to avoid breaking the law, and they also need to  
 nurture multiple support structures – not just giving covert support to recruits  
 downstream, but receiving overt support from overseas NGOs and governments.  
 And to make recruits, they also need – while under intermittent observation – to  
 make covert contact with people who aren’t themselves under suspicion. Dai’s  
 case is the reverse of Charles’s, as when she acquires a new recruit, training  
 them in tradecraft is part of the induction, socialisation and support process.

If you want to learn about what works and what doesn’t in tradecraft, then

human-rights workers are the people to talk to. (The spies and smugglers may  
 know more but they’re not talking.) The emerging picture is that the behaviour  
 of both police and nonviolent government opponents is embedded in how a  
 society operates, and evolves over time. There’s a complex game where all

but the most totalitarian rulers attempt to marginalise, tame or co-opt their  
 opponents, while the opposition movements evolve in response. Any movement  
 that starts being too nice to an unpopular ruler will lose credibility and be  
 displaced by others. The groups with the best opsec will be able to grow fastest,  
 and the most militant groups may have the greatest credibility. Pushed too hard,

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 802 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

nonviolent opposition can spawn either open insurrection or violent terrorism  
 (and rulers who denounce nonviolent opposition as ‘terrorism’ may invite just  
 that). So a smart secret police chief will cut Dai some slack, watch what she  
 gets up to, and play a long game; the Putin philosophy is to tolerate rebel  
 movements until you can ﬁgure out how to lead them. Just in case things heat  
 up later, he’ll be sparing in the use of some of his capabilities, so he’s got stu↵  
 in reserve for which she hasn’t developed countermeasures.

**25.4.3** **Living o↵ the land**

Irene, Charles and Dai may ﬁnd that their privacy tactics are inﬂuenced by the  
 kind of support they have to give or receive, but they have something else in  
 common – that they have to make the smartest use they can of what’s available  
 rather than buying or building special tools. We might perhaps call this *living*  
 *o↵ the land*3.

In the old days, covertness could mean hiding in plain sight. Every country’s

elite has places to hang out, so if a senior civil servant wants to meet an eminent  
 journalist, they can chat openly at a gentlemen’s club in London or a country  
 club in Virginia without anyone taking any notice. Such mechanisms allowed  
 people to make contact discreetly, and establish trust at the same time.

So the ﬁrst thing to ask when trying to improvise anonymous communica-

tions is what clubs or platforms you already share. One of the hard cases is  
 China, which blocks most of the services familiar to us at the Great Firewall.  
 Even there, we ﬁnd platforms open to user content that have encrypted commu-  
 nications: two examples are Linkedin and Amazon book reviews. In the case of  
 Iran, Andrew will have to ﬁgure out whether messaging systems such as Skype  
 and Signal are su�ciently widely used there for their use not to be suspicious.

The second thing you have to think through is the threat model. One thing

many of our users have in common is intermittent threat: most of the time  
 there’s no threat at all, but just occasionally it may become severe. Even a  
 large secret police force can only work so many ﬁles at once. Most of the time,  
 nobody’s interested in Mary, or in Firoz either. However, if Mary suddenly

becomes a celebrity, people will get interested in her mental health quickly  
 enough. If the government suddenly decides to go after Nur, then Skype might  
 provide her with cover in Iran, but not in Saudi Arabia – because Skype belongs  
 to Microsoft which generally complies with government warrants except in rogue  
 states. Even in Iran, some opsec is needed. If Andrew uses Skype to talk to Nur  
 then he’d better not use the same username (or IP address) to talk to all his  
 other converts too, or the religious police will learn it from their bogus convert  
 and come knocking.

A third factor is capability, including support, and motivation. Of all our

users, Elizabeth the investment banker may be the simplest case. Her work is  
 lawful and she has an IT team for support. Tor provides fairly good anonymity  
 if used with care, and the stakes are low; if a target suspects her interest,

3This phrase is also used of hackers who attack systems by exploiting the target’s vul-

nerabilities directly as they need to, and don’t leave remote access Trojans behind. It seems  
 appropriate in this context too.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 803 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

she only loses some money, not her life. Graziano faces higher risks but has an  
 experienced police organisation at his back. Justin is also playing for high stakes,  
 but has a much less tractable management problem. An election campaign is a  
 long slog of fundraising with dozens of volunteers who’re hard to discipline and  
 whose focus is victory rather than security. Liz faces signiﬁcant risks and the  
 quality of support available from Irene may vary. Dai, Firoz, Hristo and Nur all  
 face extreme hazards without any capable technical support.

Finally there’s the problem of forensics. I’ll discuss this in detail later in

section 26.5, but the main problem for the police is the sheer volume of data  
 found when searching a house nowadays: there can be terabytes of data scattered  
 over laptops, phones, tablets, cameras, TVs, memory sticks and all sorts of other  
 devices. If you don’t want a needle to be found, build a larger haystack. So Firoz  
 might have a lot of electronic junk scattered around his apartment, as cover for  
 the memory stick that has the contraband stashed in an encrypted volume. And  
 there are many ad-hoc ways in which content can be made inaccessible to the  
 casual searcher; he might damage the memory stick in some repairable way, or  
 just hide it physically. The same approach might be taken by Nur, or anyone  
 for whom a police raid might be bad news.

This all comes back to tradecraft. What works will vary from one place

and time to another, as it depends on what the local opponents actually do.  
 To defeat routine tra�c analysis, it might be enough to get a day job as a  
 receptionist: if everyone in town calls the doctors’ surgery, then the fact that  
 someone called the surgery conveys little information.

**25.4.4** **Putting it all together**

Returning now to our list of users, how can we sum up what we’ve learned?

1. The missionary, Andrew, has one of the hardest secure communication

tasks. He can’t meet his converts to train them in opsec, and needs to  
 use something that’s available and inconspicuous. Perhaps the simplest  
 solution for him is to use Skype or WhatsApp.

2. In the case of your daughter Bella, the goal is to help her grow into a

capable adult. I’d never dream of getting my grandkids to use Tor; that’s  
 just creepy. What I do is to talk about scams, phishing and other abuses  
 from time to time round the dinner table. The kids enjoy this and slowly  
 absorb the art of adversarial thinking. It’s all in the same spirit as the  
 board games we play.

3. The psychoanalyst, Charles, should have a basic awareness of the risks

and the possible mitigations. As he gets to know his patient Mary he  
 may occasionally make suggestions he thinks are relevant and needful, so  
 long as they go with the ﬂow and empower her rather than scaring her.  
 But he may also be reluctant to make suggestions if this goes against  
 the clinical method to which he is committed, by undermining her trust  
 in the therapeutic environment. It may be too hard to negotiate this

environment; informed consent is a di�cult issue in therapy because of  
 the asymmetric power relationship between the patient and the therapist.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 804 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

In practice both parties may lack relevant knowledge, and even if Mary  
 knows more about the risks than Charles, she may feel unable to o↵er any  
 suggestions.

4. The human-rights activist Dai has one of the hardest jobs of all, but as

she’s shaken down by the secret police from time to time and works with  
 other activists with whom she can share experiences, she can evolve good  
 tradecraft over time.

5. The M&A analyst Elizabeth may well ﬁnd that Tor does pretty well what

she needs. Her main problem will be using it properly and paying attention  
 to the kind of queries she makes of target websites so as not to give the  
 game away.

6. Firoz is in a bad way, and quite frankly were I in his situation I’d set out

on the walk to Germany. If that’s not possible then he should not just use  
 Tor, but get a Mac or Linux box so he’s less exposed to porn-site malware.  
 He’ll need to think through in advance what happens if he gets raided by  
 the police. (Perhaps he should join the Revolutionary Guard so the police  
 won’t raid him in the ﬁrst place.)

7. Graziano also has a hard job. It’s bad enough defending a covert network

against one or two traitors at the client end (as Andrew must); defending  
 against occasional treachery at the server side is even harder. Part of his  
 solution might be a compartmented police record keeping system, as we  
 described in section 10.2, to stop bent cops getting access to everything.  
 He might also chat to informers using whatever mechanisms they use.

8. Hristo may see advantages in using a crypto phone, but when the cops

crack it they may roll up his whole network. In his shoes I’d learn from  
 Dai that in the long run the group with the best opsec wins out. So I’d  
 focus on that, and educate my colleagues about tra�c security. If we use a  
 chat app such as Signal with ephemeral messages, and change phones and  
 SIM cards regularly, then I can see which of my colleagues are disciplined,  
 and decide who to trust with what.

9. Irene the journalist has one of the most challenging jobs of all. A jour-

nalist needs to be skilled not just at writing stories but at reading people,  
 assessing truth and judging risk. An investigative journalist also needs  
 tradecraft. Just as any journalist nowadays needs to know how to drive  
 a search engine, a sleuth needs to know how to protect her sources. It’s  
 not enough to have some basic familiarity with privacy tech; she needs to  
 know how to teach the right tactics to contacts who may be under extreme  
 stress and at risk of their lives. That means understanding not just the  
 people, but also the threats and the tools. (And just as this job becomes  
 ever more critical and highly skilled, the budgets available to the press are  
 collapsing, as Google and Facebook eat all their advertising.)

10. Justin also has a di�cult problem. It’s hard to protect short-lived high-

consequence e↵orts sta↵ed by enthusiastic volunteers who are hard to dis-  
 cipline and who may have unﬁxable bad technology habits. However he  
 probably doesn’t understand his vulnerability, and will just press on, hop-  
 ing for the best.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 805 | Ross Anderson |

*25.4. PETS AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY*

Richard Clayton wrote a thesis on anonymity and traceability in cyberspace,

which analysed how complicated network anonymity has become [442]. There  
 are many ways in which even people who made no particular e↵ort to hide  
 themselves end up not being traceable. It’s hard to establish responsibility

when abusive tra�c comes from a phone line in a multi-occupied student house,  
 or a prepaid mobile phone. ISPs also often keep inadequate logs and can’t trace  
 tra�c afterwards. But there are also many ways in which people who try to  
 be anonymous, fail; eventually people make mistakes, regardless of how much  
 e↵ort they put into opsec. And technology is making opsec harder all the time.  
 This even applies to government security and intelligence agencies.

**25.4.5** **The name’s Bond. James Bond**

We got a warning in January 2010 that traditional intelligence agency tradecraft,  
 as described in the novels of Ian Fleming and John le Carr´e, was beginning to  
 fray. The Israelis sent a team of 26 Mossad agents to Dubai to kill Mahmoud al-  
 Mabhouh, a senior Hamas o�cial who was there to buy arms from Iran. In the  
 past such killings had been covert, but this time the UAE authorities collected  
 and examined all the CCTV footage, correlating it with the agents’ hotel stays  
 and border crossings. It turned out twelve of them used British passports – many  
 of them issued to Brits who’d emigrated to Israel, but with the agents’ photos  
 on them – along with six Irish, four French, three Australian and one German.  
 Britain and Australia expelled Israeli diplomats for passport o↵ences [307]. In  
 the modern world of pervasive surveillance, biometrics at border controls and  
 online passport databases make it a lot harder to travel under a false name.

A second warning came in 2013, when a report analysed the kidnapping of a

Muslim cleric called Abu Omar in Italy in 2003, and pinned it on the CIA, lead-  
 ing to a number of agents being charged by the Italian police in absentia [1274].  
 The third warning came in 2014, when the Chinese stole the entire US security  
 clearance database from the O�ce of Personnel Management, as I described in  
 section 2.2.2; this included not just the entire US intelligence community but  
 22 million current and former federal employees. The weaponisation of personal  
 information continues; the 2016 Investigatory Powers Act enabled the UK gov-  
 ernment to demand bulk personal datasets from ﬁrms who have them, giving  
 the agencies access to credit records, medical records and much else. By the end  
 of the decade, the military were worried that the Chinese were collecting per-  
 sonal information on every single enlisted person for use in future information  
 warfare, while intelligence agencies were starting to wonder whether the age of  
 traditional spying was over [1274]. The defence and intelligence communities  
 have responded in various ways, with the Pentagon telling sta↵ not to use con-  
 sumer DNA testing kits and the Chinese apparently favouring more low-tech  
 stu↵ like dead drops, but it’s not clear that there’s any silver bullet. It’s hard  
 to run covert operations when so much is known about almost everybody.

In this context, China’s bid for ‘AI supremacy’ is concerning. The country’s

political structure encourages, rather than restrains, this technology’s worst  
 uses: President Xi wants an an all-seeing digital system of social control, pa-  
 trolled by precog algorithms that identify potential dissenters in real time [48].  
 I discussed face recognition in section 17.3; as China’s cities are straddled with

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 806 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

CCTV systems, they can surely follow people about. But how well will this  
 work overall? The use of machine learning in multisensor data fusion appli-  
 cations isn’t straightforward, and it tends not to work well or at all at social  
 prediction – as we discussed earlier in this chapter. In section 26.4.1 we discuss  
 how the Chinese system appears to be using the dissident Uighur population of  
 Sinkiang as the test case, with substantial human-rights abuses which have led  
 to US and EU sanctions against the Chinese ﬁrms involved.

Meanwhile, in our somewhat more chaotic democracies, it’s hard to secure

political campaigns from attack, as our discussion of Justin’s case brings out.  
 The resulting operational problems from the 2018 US election are discussed by  
 Maciej Ceglowski [397], who also warns of the broader problems of securing  
 elections. We turn to them next.

**25.5** **Elections**

As I write in 2020, people are worried about the conduct and credibility of the  
 forthcoming U.S, elections, following the controversy about Russian interference  
 in 2016 in both the UK Brexit referendum and the US elections later that year.  
 Because of the huge diversity of voting systems, US elections have for years been  
 a testbed for voting technology. There have been very many attempts to defeat  
 the will of the people, ﬁrst by candidates, and more recently by external actors.  
 We also have signiﬁcant experience from the Commonwealth, which contains  
 most of the other former British colonies; all of its member states hold elections  
 of some form or another [329].

The story of election technology and its security is one of the co-evolution

of attack and defence over centuries. In school, we all learned some variant of  
 the history of how we evolved modern constitutions. Participatory government  
 has long been widespread at the level of small groups such as villages, where  
 everyone knows everyone else and decisions can be taken by consensus or by a  
 majority; the problem is scaling it up to larger units such as cities and states.  
 The Greeks and Romans experimented with mechanisms for selecting represen-  
 tatives to sit in assemblies, councils and courts but found that, all too often,  
 democracy degenerated into oligarchy, or a monarch seized power. They devised  
 constitutional mechanisms to reduce the risk of such failures, including the sep-  
 aration of powers, voting by geographical constituencies rather than by tribe,  
 selecting o�ceholders by lot rather than by ballot, and term limits. Although  
 the Roman Empire ended these experiments, the ideal persisted through papal  
 elections and medieval guilds via Swiss and Italian city-states. In the English  
 Civil War, a parliament seized power from the king and cut his head o↵; the  
 settlement of 1689 made England a constitutional monarchy. The seventeenth  
 century also saw the ﬁrst assemblies in the New World, leading to the American  
 revolution in the eighteenth century, where the Founding Fathers were inspired  
 by the Greek and Roman model.

Behind it lies another story of how the elites who enjoyed power kept manip-

ulating the system so as to hang on to it. Early elections had no privacy; Roman  
 electors lined up behind their candidate, and voting by open outcry remained  
 the norm until the nineteenth century, leading to bribery and intimidation. The

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 807 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

tension in England was about social class: barons acquired some rights in 1215,  
 followed by other property-owners in a series of reforms. The ﬁrst modern re-  
 form in 1832 introduced redistricting: few of the English cities that had sprung  
 up in the industrial revolution had MPs, while other constituencies had few  
 voters and the MP was selected by the local landowner. It took a whole series  
 of reform bills to extend and equalise the franchise to men of successively lower  
 wealth and income, but the high costs of campaigning limited political careers  
 to the wealthy. Eventually, secret ballots were introduced in 1872. Meanwhile  
 in America the story was more about race. The Civil War ended slavery and  
 extended the franchise to all men; but after the failure of Reconstruction, former  
 Confederate states devised literacy tests and other laws to stop black citizens  
 voting. Only after World War I were women allowed to vote in either country.  
 Abuses were rife: to this day, politicians in the UK, the USA and elsewhere try  
 by fair means and foul to get their supporters to vote more than their opponents.

**25.5.1** **The history of voting machines**

From the late 1800s there were waves of technological innovation that tried to  
 push back on electoral abuses in America, a story told by Douglas Jones and  
 Barbara Simons [991]. Many cities and states had political ‘machines’ that not  
 only got out the vote but also manipulated it, exploiting the fact that elections  
 in America are organised at state and county level rather than nationally as  
 in Britain. In New York, Tammany Hall’s Boss Tweed would sometimes stu↵  
 ballot boxes, and sometimes just have his precinct sta↵ make up the results. To  
 push back on this, inventors came up with everything from transparent ballot  
 boxes to voting machines that clocked a mechanical counter when a lever was  
 pulled.

Crooked politicians and o�cials adapted. In Louisiana, the Long brothers

defeated the seals, set the count to the desired outcome and ran the state for  
 years. Eventually people realised that the technicians in the county building who  
 maintain and program the machines controlled the outcome. Mechanical voting  
 machines had about 100 bits of programmability, typically in the form of cotter  
 pins and other mechanical linkages, which nobody else understood. Wear and  
 tear could also cover tampering; the technicians could cause an undercount for a  
 candidate they didn’t favour by knocking a few teeth o↵ the relevant gearwheel.

**25.5.2** **Hanging chads**

Inventors devised a competing type of machine that punched a hole in a paper  
 roll, inspired by the player piano; once punched cards were popularised by tab-  
 ulating machines and computers, they became widely used. The idea was that  
 a vote punched as a hole in a card is both human-readable and capable of being  
 counted quickly by machine. It’s also anonymous once dropped into a ballot  
 box (unless you worry about ﬁngerprints).

In the 2000 US presidential election, the result turned on Florida, which used

punched-card machines, and the recount involved arguing over chads – the little  
 rectangles of cardboard that a voter punched out of the card. Was a ‘hanging

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 808 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

chad’, still attached to the card, a valid vote? What about a dimple, where  
 the punch hadn’t penetrated? Vote-counting machines rejected over 100,000  
 votes while George Bush’s majority over Al Gore was only 537. Eventually the  
 Supreme Court halted a recount, giving the election to Bush. This created such  
 controversy that in 2002 Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA)  
 which allocated $3.8 billion for the purchase of newer election equipment.

A gold rush followed as companies scrambled to build and sell machines into

this huge new market. This alarmed security engineers. In fact, as the Florida  
 recount was underway, I was at the Applications Security conference in New  
 Orleans, whose attendees included many NSA and defense contractor sta↵, and  
 we organised a debate. Even though politicians thought that mechanical or

paper voting systems should be replaced with electronics as quickly as possible,  
 security experts didn’t agree. A large majority voted, on an old-fashioned show  
 of hands, that we didn’t trust electronic elections. A 1988 report by Roy Saltman  
 at the National Bureau of Standards had already spelled out most of what was  
 likely to go wrong [1641].

Some of the new products were *direct recording electronic* (DRE) machines,

the descendants of the lever machines of the 19th century, which typically pre-  
 sented the candidates and other ballot options on a screen, then recorded the  
 voter’s input. Later research showed that about a quarter of votes made with  
 a DRE machine contained at least one error – deﬁned as a vote di↵erent from  
 voter intent. Such ‘vote ﬂipping’ was widely reported in Sarasota, Florida, in  
 2006, and it was unclear whether the root cause was usability or technology  
 (depending for example on how you classify insensitive touch screens). Either  
 way, a third of voters ignored wrong votes on the review screen [991].

Many problems were reported in the 2002 elections [806]; the following sum-

mer, the leading voting-machine supplier Diebold left its source code on an  
 open web site in a security lapse. Yoshi Kohno and colleagues analysed it and  
 found that the equipment was“far below even the minimal standards of security  
 expected in other contexts”: voters could cast unlimited votes, insiders could  
 identify voters, and outsiders could also hack the system [1075]. Almost on cue,  
 Diebold CEO Walden O’Dell, who was active in the campaign to re-elect Pres-  
 ident Bush, wrote ‘I am committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes  
 to the President next year’ [1987]. This led to uproar, and calls for a law to  
 implement Yoshi’s key recommendation, that there should be a voter-veriﬁable  
 audit trail. (The voting researcher Rebecca Mercuri had argued as early as 1992  
 that DRE equipment should display the voter’s choice on a paper roll behind  
 a window and get them to validate it prior to casting [1295].) In some DRE  
 machines this is provided in the form of a nonvolatile memory cartridge that  
 records all voter actions, but this creates a tension with privacy. Other DRE  
 machines had no audit trail at all; all an auditor could do was ask them to print  
 out the same result again.

**25.5.3** **Optical scan**

Most of the non-DRE equipment consisted of *optical-scan* machines that would  
 scan a ballot paper or card that the voter had completed, whether with a pen  
 or a special ballot-marking device, and then dropped into a ballot box. Optical

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 809 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

scan systems had been around since the 1980s, and had evolved from the mark-  
 sense scanners used to score multiple-choice tests in schools.

In the following electoral cycle, Californian Secretary of State Debra Bowen

authorized a large team of computer scientists, led by University of California  
 professors David Wagner and Matt Bishop, to do a thorough evaluation of the  
 state’s voting systems. The reports made depressing reading [306]. All the

DRE voting systems they examined had serious design ﬂaws that led directly to  
 speciﬁc vulnerabilities that attackers could exploit to a↵ect election outcomes.  
 All of the previously approved voting machines – by Diebold, Hart and Sequoia  
 – had their certiﬁcation withdrawn, and a late-submitted system from ES&S  
 was also decertiﬁed. California could take such radical action, as perhaps three-  
 quarters of the nine million people who voted in 2004 did so using a paper or  
 optical-scan ballot.

A similar inspection of Florida equipment was carried out by scientists at

Florida State University, who reported a bundle of new vulnerabilities in the  
 Diebold equipment in July 2007 [749]. Ohio followed suit and came to similar  
 conclusions. All the evaluated equipment had serious security failings: data

that should have been encrypted wasn’t; encryption done badly (for example,  
 the key stored in the clear next to the ciphertext); bu↵er overﬂows; useless  
 physical security; SQL injection; audit logs that could be tampered with; and  
 undocumented back doors [1261].

But if you abandon DRE machines for optical scanning of paper ballots, as

most US counties have since 2006, you can do a hand recount if a close result is  
 challenged. But there are still lots of things to go wrong.

First, hundreds of counties use ballot-marking devices, so that the voter

makes their choices on a touch screen, after which the machine prints out a  
 voting form they can inspect visually and drop into a ballot box. But some  
 machines make separate human-readable and machine-readable marks, and if  
 such a machine can be hacked, it could print a ballot card where the text says  
 ‘Gore’ but the barcode says ‘Bush’. So there’s a lot of detail around what you  
 inspect, and how; best practice is to design for a *risk-limiting audit*. In the UK,  
 the gold standard is still the hand-marked paper ballot, but in the USA the  
 vendors of ballot-marking machines have enlisted disability rights campaigners  
 to sell their equipment.

Our experience in the UK is broadly comparable, although we never adopted

voting machines. Tony Blair’s government progressively expanded the use of  
 postal and other absentee forms of ballot, which was criticised by opposition  
 parties as it made vote-buying and intimidation easier. Party workers (of which  
 Blair’s Labour party had more) could pressure voters into opting for a postal  
 ballot, then collect their ballot forms, ﬁll them out, and submit them. Plans to  
 extend voting from the post to email and text were criticised for making this  
 existing low-grade abuse easier and potentially open to automation. Finally,  
 in the May 2007 local government elections, electronic voting pilots were held  
 in eleven areas around the UK. Two of my postdocs acted as scrutineers in  
 the Bedford election, and observed the same kind of shambles that had been  
 reported at various US elections. The counting was slower than with paper;  
 the system (optical-scan software) had a high error rate, resulting in many

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 810 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

more ballots than expected being sent to human adjudicators for decision. (The  
 printers had changed the ink halfway through the print run, so half the ballot  
 papers were ‘the wrong shade of black’.) Even worse, the software sometimes  
 sent the same ballot paper to multiple adjudicators, and it wasn’t clear which  
 of their decisions got counted. In the end, so that everyone could go home,  
 the returning o�cer accepted a letter of assurance (written on the spot by the  
 vendor) saying that no vote would have been miscounted as a result. Yet the  
 exercise left the representatives from the various parties with serious misgivings.  
 The Open Rights Group, which organised the volunteers, reported that it could  
 not express conﬁdence in the results for the areas observed [1472]. The Electoral  
 Commission did not disagree, and this experience persuaded the UK to continue  
 using hand-counted, hand-marked paper ballots to this day. (UK election abuses  
 happen at other places in the kill chain, from voter registration through postal  
 voting abuses to breaches of campaign ﬁnance limits: so ﬁxing the computers  
 won’t be enough to ﬁx the problems.)

**25.5.4** **Software independence**

This experience brought home both the importance of, and the di�culty of  
 achieving, *software independence* – the property that an undetected change or  
 error in voting software cannot cause an undetectable change or error in an elec-  
 tion outcome [1608]. We must assume that vote-counting software is buggy and  
 it may be malicious, so we should not have to depend on it, and the possibility  
 of a manual recount is a vital mitigation. But how do you do that in practice?  
 In Bedford the candidates reckoned that a manual recount would have led to  
 the same result but with a di↵erent majority, and didn’t want to spend another  
 20 hours on a full manual recount.

The consensus view in 2020 is that systems must be designed to support a

*risk-limiting audit* that can place strict bounds on the probability of fraud or  
 error arising as a result of things going wrong with the software. For optical  
 scan, this might mean keeping all the votes from each ballot box in a separate  
 bundle, so that a candidate could challenge “let’s do a hand count of boxes  
 17, 37 and 169” and this could be completed quickly. If the count is close, or  
 discrepancies are found, you can hand-count more boxes. (In fact, an argument  
 over partial versus state-wide recounts ﬁgured in the Bush v Gore lawsuit in  
 2000.)

Cryptographers have tried to make vote-tallying more veriﬁable. Research

into cryptographic election mechanisms goes back to the early 1980s, when  
 David Chaum proposed giving voters a digital ballot token constructed using the  
 same general techniques as digital cash, which they can spend with the candidate  
 of their choice. In section 5.7.7 I described the mechanism: it’s an interesting  
 crypto design problem as you need to support anonymity and auditability at  
 the same time. The voter needs to be conﬁdent that their vote has been tallied  
 properly but in order to prevent vote buying they must not be able to prove  
 this to anybody else – the vote must be *receipt-free*.

After more than thirty years of research, there are now well-understood

mechanisms for this. For example, the free Election Guard system from Josh  
 Benaloh and colleagues at Microsoft Research allows digital ballots to be cast

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 811 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

in a vote collection device such as a scanner or ballot-marker in such a way that  
 the encrypted ballots can be counted – the homomorphic property of El-Gamal  
 encryption is used so that multiplying two encrypted votes has the same e↵ect  
 as adding two plaintext ones. A bit more work is required to ensure that all the  
 ballots are well-formed and the result is decrypted properly, but the outcome is  
 a software-independent count [223]. This was piloted in Fulton, Wisconsin, in  
 2020 in a primary election for Wisconsin Supreme Court candidates.

Cryptographic vote-tallying is marketed as ‘end-to-end veriﬁable’ but this

claim is somewhat ambitious. It solves only the vote-tallying part of the prob-  
 lem. As with the electronic signature devices discussed in section 18.6.1, you  
 don’t have a trustworthy user interface, so you still have to worry about bugs  
 and Trojans in the ballot-marking device or scanner. You still need the audit.  
 You still have to worry about attacks on voter registration, on pollbooks, on re-  
 sult aggregation, and on the announcement of results. And if the vote collection  
 device is an app on the voter’s phone, you have to worry about vote-buying and  
 intimidation, as with postal ballots. Then you also have to worry about phone  
 malware, and about the quality of the design and implementation. A detailed  
 evaluation of such an app that has been used in some US elections found dozens  
 of problems [615].

**25.5.5** **Why electronic elections are hard**

Another interesting threat emerged in the Netherlands. DRE voting machines  
 had been introduced progressively during the 1990s, and cyber-rights activists  
 were worried. They ran some tests and discovered that the machines from

the leading vendor, Nedap, were vulnerable to a Tempest attack: using simple  
 equipment, an observer sitting outside the polling station could see what party  
 a voter had selected [785]. From the security engineer’s perspective this was  
 useful, as it led to the declassiﬁcation by the German intelligence folk of a  
 lot of Cold War Tempest material, as I discussed in section 19.3.2 (the Nedap  
 machines are also used in Germany). The activists got the political result they  
 wanted: the District Court in Amsterdam decertiﬁed all the Nedap machines.

As for other countries, the picture is mixed. In some elections in less-

developed countries, the state has systematically censored opposition parties’  
 websites and run denial-of-service attacks; in others (typically the most back-  
 ward), elections are rigged by more traditional methods such as ﬁling bogus  
 criminal charges to get opposition candidates o↵ the ballot, or just kidnapping  
 and murdering them. The best survey of abuses worldwide may be the Com-  
 monwealth’s 2020 report [329]. The news as I write this is of unrest following the  
 election in Belarus where ‘Europe’s last dictator’, Alexander Lukashenko, de-  
 clared he’d won over 80% of the votes in an election at which exit polls suggested  
 that his opponent Svetlana Tikhanovskaya had actually won 70% of the vote.  
 His thugs compelled her to make a concession speech and drove her into exile  
 in Lithuania, keeping her husband hostage. Lukashenko then put the resulting  
 demonstrations down by force [611]. Another news story was the overthrow  
 in a coup of the President of Mali, following allegations that he had stolen an  
 election ﬁve months previously [1200].

In recent years there have also been many tussles over population registra-

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 812 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

tion; in section 7.4.2.2 I described how less developed countries rig elections by  
 re-issuing the national ID card, and making cards harder to get for the ethnic  
 groups less likely to support the president. Even where registration mechanisms  
 are fairly robust, as in India with its Aadhaar biometric system mentioned in  
 section 17.4, the authorities can attack voting rights directly: the government  
 of Narendra Modi passed a law in 2019 to disenfranchise many Muslims, par-  
 ticularly those in border areas.

This is a very old playbook. As I already mentioned, right up until the

twentieth century, electoral history in the UK was about whether poor people  
 could vote, while in the USA it was about whether black people could vote. Even  
 in Florida in 2000, more voters were disenfranchised as a result of registration  
 abuses than there were ballots disputed because of hanging chads. And just as  
 the government can bias an election by making it harder to vote if you haven’t  
 got a car, it could make it harder to vote if you haven’t got a computer. There  
 have also been lawsuits over whether the ballots, or the voting machines, were  
 made so complex as to disenfranchise the less educated.

Several disputes over technical security have got to court. For example, the

state of Georgia appears a complete mess as I write in 2020; after years of trying  
 to make it harder to vote, failing to ﬁx known ﬂaws in Diebold machines and  
 being targeted by the Russians, the state government was ordered by a court to  
 replace its systems. The new systems were in meltdown during the June 2020  
 primaries, with insu�cient capacity to meet voter demand [851].

However the main focus of attention has shifted to the use of social media in

elections. Barack Obama used Facebook e↵ectively in 2008 and 2012, prompting  
 others to study social media; the 2016 election went to Donald Trump, who was  
 not only much more skilful than Hilary Clinton at using Twitter, but ended  
 up paying signiﬁcantly less for his Facebook ads. As I explained in section 8.5,  
 the ad auction mechanisms used by Google and Facebook multiply the amount  
 that you bid by a factor called ‘ad quality’, which is the probability that people  
 will click on the ad and, in the case of social media, share it. The outcome is  
 extremism bias: inﬂammatory ads are cheaper.

Another factor in 2016 was Russian interference, as I described in sec-

tion 2.2.3. Russian agents not only campaigned for Trump, running troll farms  
 and social-media advertising campaigns aimed at suppressing black votes among  
 other things; they hacked the Gmail of Clinton campaign chair John Podesta.  
 They hacked into systems in Illinois and Florida (and probably some other  
 states) and could have manipulated voter registration, but they opted not to  
 pull the trigger on those attacks because they didn’t need them; they hacked  
 the electorate instead. Had Clinton won, then if either of those states had voted  
 for her, evidence of ‘fraud’ could have emerged to undermine her presidency.

How will this all a↵ect the election due in November 2020? As this book is

due for release then, I will merely note that there’s already been a ﬁasco over  
 result aggregation in the Democratic primary in Iowa [637], and the Russians  
 are once more running inﬂammatory pro-Republican campaigns online [1619].  
 Both Twitter and Facebook have removed postings by Trump and his associates  
 containing false information about Covid [1030], and there is concern that he or  
 others might use online media to undermine the electoral process, or conﬁdence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 813 | Ross Anderson |

*25.5. ELECTIONS*

in the results. Trump prepared the ground at the Republican National Conven-  
 tion by claiming he could only lose if the election was stolen. There is anxiety  
 within Facebook that although Zuckerberg has said he’ll block attempts at voter  
 suppression, he’s been giving the right wing an easier ride [1740]. In August, the  
 major tech companies announced an alliance to ﬁght election manipulation [963].  
 But what about a dispute over the result afterwards? There’s over a century of  
 American political history to warn us against looking for technological solutions  
 to political problems.

In the di↵erent political culture of Europe, we have a long tradition of cam-

paign ﬁnance limits (America did too before the Citizens’ United decision of the  
 Supreme Court turned it into a free-for-all). Parties can spend only so much  
 per campaign, and per candidate; and most European countries forbid paid TV  
 ads during campaigns. But enforcement has been getting steadily weaker. Dur-  
 ing the Brexit referendum, for example, both Leave campaigns exceeded the  
 spending limit but just paid the £20,000 maximum ﬁne. The Russian involve-  
 ment in Brexit was largely in the form of ﬁnancial contributions and further  
 campaigning on social media. What might be done to block such abuses?

At the 2019 conference of the Open Rights Group, I argued that we should

extend the advertising ban from TV ads to all ads on Facebook, Twitter, and  
 YouTube. This is not just a matter of avoiding the worst of big-money poli-  
 tics of the USA, but also because political ads that are targeted at individuals  
 rather than at everybody foster extremism and fragment political discourse. The  
 politicians’ job is to mediate conﬂicts between di↵erent stakeholders in society;  
 if these groups end up in their own ﬁlter bubbles, then our politicians can be  
 tempted to inﬂame conﬂicts instead. Banning ads will not be a panacea (India  
 banned Facebook ads in 2019) but it will keep election contests more within the  
 cultural and economic space with which Europeans are familiar.

Elections remain one of the tough security engineering problems. While the

individual problems – such as voter registration, vote casting, vote counting, re-  
 sult aggregation and audit – all have reasonably robust solutions, putting them  
 together into a robust system is nontrivial. Computer systems for registering  
 electors, recording votes and tallying them have a number of properties which  
 make them almost a pathological case for robust design, implementation, test-  
 ing and deployment. First, the election date is immovable and, ready or not,  
 the software must be deployed then. Second, di↵erent regions and countries  
 have di↵erent requirements and they change over time. Third, in the long gap  
 between elections, sta↵ with experience move on and know-how is lost. Fourth,  
 operating systems and other software must be updated to ﬁx known vulnerabili-  
 ties, and updates can also break security in unforeseen ways; a Windows update  
 caused the EV2000 voting machine to highlight the last voter’s choice to the  
 next voter [991]. Yet most voting machines in use in the USA are no longer  
 manufactured, so where are the updates to come from and how will they be  
 tested? Finally, elections are high-stress events, which increases the likelihood  
 of mistakes [1357].

Let’s now look up from the engineering to the politics. In the event of attack,

the winners don’t want to investigate what might have gone wrong if they can  
 possibly avoid it – as we saw in both the USA and the UK in 20164. The

4As I write, litigation continues in an attempt to force the release of the redacted parts of

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 814 | Ross Anderson |

*25.6. SUMMARY*

‘customer’ for an election is the losing side, and in the absence of any hope of  
 redress – whether through the courts, or through the ballot box next time –  
 trust in democracy’s mechanisms can start to fail. But there is no ‘designer’ to  
 ensure that the mechanisms and laws align all the way along the electoral cycle.  
 On the contrary, it’s typically the incumbent who tweaks the laws, buys the  
 voting machines, and creates as many advantages for their own side, small and  
 large, as the local political culture will tolerate. And while voting mechanisms  
 can support a democratic consensus, they cannot replace it: there are too many  
 other ways to undermine the outcome. If the underlying social contract erodes,  
 a hyper-partisan environment can lead incumbents to feel they do not dare to  
 cede power. In the worst cases the outcome can be civil war and failed states.

**25.6** **Summary**

Some of the most challenging security engineering problems in 2020 have to do  
 with the fact that as software becomes pervasive in the services we use and the  
 devices around us, the design of these services and devices comes up against  
 the underlying complexity in human societies. We looked at four examples.

Self-driving cars can cope with empty desert roads but ﬁnd real tra�c with  
 human drivers very much harder. Machine-learning mechanisms can go only so  
 far; they may be brilliant at pattern matching but lack understanding, which  
 opens up new possibilities of abuse at all levels in the stack – especially as peo-  
 ple rush to use them for social prediction tasks for which they are intrinsically  
 unsuited. Privacy-enhancing tools and techniques are one way to explore the  
 security consequences of human complexity, but however hard we work to en-  
 crypt and anonymise things, social structure tends to show through one way or  
 another. And ﬁnally, we have elections; when incumbent rulers are prepared to  
 do everything they think they can get away with – whether within or beyond  
 the law – to stay in o�ce, we can learn a lot about the limits of both technology  
 and law.

As more and more of human life moves online, so the criticality and the

complexity of online applications grow at the same time. Many of the familiar  
 problems come back again and again, in ever less tractable forms. Traditional  
 software engineering tools helped developers get ever further up the mountain  
 of systems complexity before they fell o↵. What sort of tools, techniques, and  
 governance processes are appropriate for dealing with the complexity of real  
 societies? And how does this interact with politics? These are the topics we  
 will try to tackle in the third part of this book.

**Research Problems**

One bundle of research problems is around how to split responsibility between  
 people and automation. HCI guru Ben Shneiderman argues that human control  
 plus extensive automation is the sweet spot for systems to be reliable, safe and  
 trustworthy [1723]. This is natural for ﬂight-control systems and life-support

the Mueller report into that election.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 815 | Ross Anderson |

*25.6. SUMMARY*

machinery, but scaling it up to things like recommender systems and hate-  
 speech detection is not trivial. How can humans do quality control on millions  
 of ﬁltering decisions being taken every second by a large tech company? And  
 what should the governance on top of that look like? Underlying it all is a long  
 debate about whether automation (including ML) is heading towards artiﬁcial  
 intelligence or intelligence augmentation [87].

As automation involving ML becomes more pervasive, the questions may

become broader. Architects and city planners will have to wrestle with how  
 we design living and working environments that have to take into account the  
 interests of multiple stakeholders. Then there will be global social and political  
 questions around the coevolution of mechanisms and societies. In the second  
 edition I said that “one of the critical research problems between now and the  
 third edition of this book ... will be how protection mechanisms scale... how  
 one goes about evolving ‘security’ (or any other emergent property) in a socio-  
 technical system with billions of users.” I noted that simple systems of rules,  
 such as the multilevel security beloved of governments, were never natural, and  
 people always had to break them to get their work done. So what lies beyond?  
 We have more experience of that now; several large tech ﬁrms run systems with  
 over a billion active users, and hundreds of ﬁrms have over a hundred million.

In such systems, the technology and the behaviour adapt to each other, but

the system developers are much more powerful and have di↵erent incentives  
 (they want data while users want privacy). The basic mechanisms that humans  
 have for rule negotiation at scale are competition in the market and government  
 regulation. Neither of these is adequate on its own, and the interaction between  
 tech and politics may even undermine the machinery of selecting a government.

We engineers need to care about these issues, and try to understand them.

In the third section of this book we’ll try to tackle the broader policy and  
 management questions (such as surveillance versus privacy), how the evolution  
 of large complex systems can be managed and governed, and how technology  
 can be regulated to meet social goals such as safety and privacy.

**Further Reading**

For an introduction to car security, you might ﬁrst look at Charlie Miller and  
 Chris Valasek’s account of how they hacked a Jeep [1316], then at Craig Smith’s  
 ‘Car Hackers’ Handbook’ if you want to dive into the technical detail [1792].

Nicolas Papernot’s “Marauder’s Map” may be the best introduction right

now to the fast-moving ﬁeld of adversarial machine learning [1493], while Gary  
 McGraw and colleagues o↵er design principles plus a list of things to think  
 about when working on the security of systems with machine-learning compo-  
 nents [1267]. Google’s Je↵ Dean, its SVP of machine learning, describes the  
 company’s research on AI fairness at [528]. My own philosophical position on  
 the AI versus IA debate may be found at [87].

As for personal privacy in the face of hostile state actors, that’s a moving

conﬂict as the tools evolve on both sides. One starting point might be the

“Surveillance Self-Defence” page on EFF website [618]. There’s an interesting

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 816 | Ross Anderson |

*25.6. SUMMARY*

account by Ben Collier of the organisational and social dynamics of the Tor  
 project, which maintains the leading online anonymity service, at [458]. For  
 more technical depth, see section 20.4 on Tor, or the anonymity bibliography  
 at [125].

The history of US voting systems is told by Douglas Jones and Barbara Si-

mons [991]. The US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine  
 produced an extensive report on election security in response to the events of  
 2016 [1388]. More recently, the Commonwealth produced a guide to the elec-  
 tronic security of elections based on its own member states’ very diverse expe-  
 riences, also covering the whole cycle from registration through vote casting,  
 tallying and communication of the results [329].

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Security Engineering** | 817 | Ross Anderson |