/dev/random

ROBERT G. FERRELL

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Lest I give the impression of being some horrible Luddite for what I will say later in this column, let me tell you a story from the before times. Way back in the second half of the last decade of the twentieth century (because saying it that way takes more words than simply writing "the late 1990s," and that means I have to come up with that much less actual content), I was involved in the Internet Engineering Task Force. I say "involved" but mostly what I did was join working groups and then sit in the back wishing I knew enough about whatever they were talking about to participate in some meaningful way. I was trying to be dutiful and read all of the drafts as they came out—or at least as many as I could without suffering debilitating brain damage. That got to be a little confusing and tedious after a while, so I decided to organize them a little better.

I created a simple HTML-based interface using tables for sorting and display and stuck it on a local Apache server. After a while I decided to share this tool with the world just to be a good netizen, not really expecting many to make use of it. I had also created a couple of the early MAC address OUI lookup and IANA Assigned Port Number sites. I was fond of that sort of thing back in the day. Of course, everything was written in Perl and used flat databases exclusively, so scalability was nonexistent; I did all content generation and maintenance manually, but I'd always enjoyed that stuff so it wasn't a problem…at first.

I called my IETF draft site *The Internet Report* because the name was sort of catchy and being a federal government employee I wasn't allowed to be overly creative or possess a functional imagination. And after all, it *was* a report on something rather closely connected with the Internet as an organism. Truth in advertising.

The *Report* proved to be much more popular than I had anticipated, probably because it allowed draft monkeys to skim the steady stream of documents coming out of the IETF more easily. Eventually, after I'd had the site up for a couple of years, the Internet Society took an interest and started asking me to provide various features and improvements. I really didn't have additional time to devote to the project or, in truth, expertise to do a lot more than I already had, so after a few months of this I suggested they just take the whole thing over, which they did. It may still be in existence, for all I know. I haven't looked for it in a number of years, but I hope it illustrates that I'm not in any way against technology or the Internet.

This issue of *;login:* marks a transition from bimonthly to quarterly. Coincidentally, it also marks my tenth anniversary as a columnist for this august publication. In that decade we have seen a lot of what I hesitate to call "progress" in regard to the cyberverse. While it has always been a vast wasteland, the landscape of our shared system of tubes within tubes has convolved: hundreds of petabytes of cute cat videos, ad hominem pejoratives, memes about memes about memes, and that execrable monument to self-absorption and bad photography, the ridiculous selfie.

Perhaps most significant has been the rise of social media, towering like a gossip-fueled Godzilla over the Tokyo skyline of our online existence. We now know far more about everyone on social media than we do about our neighbors and often even our own family (unless they happen to be our Facebook friends, too). Why people feel it incumbent upon themselves to share every last detail of their daily lives with the entire Internet is quite frankly beyond my meager comprehension. Not only is social media an exercise in grossly inflated oversharing, it is an addiction for many people that takes over their lives as surely as will heroin or gambling or collecting pop culture memorabilia still in the original packaging.

I know too many people who, were I to suggest that they leave their phone on the table and go for a walk, would look at me with the expression of grave concern usually reserved for a friend suddenly struck mentally ill or react with horror as though I had asked them to remove an appendage (of their own) with a rusty steak knife. People are hooked on connectivity, often to the exclusion of even basic needs such as hygiene. This dependence goes very deep. I have seen grievously injured people posting about the motor vehicle accident in which they were just involved as a result of texting while driving, without ever seemingly realizing the two events were inextricably linked. The discomfort of being unable to access the grid even for a short time is so pronounced that almost no price is too great to pay to avoid that heinous fate. I don't know whether this is a fad or the next inevitable step in our social evolution, but if the latter is the case, the world portrayed in *The Matrix* may well be more predictive documentary than dystopian fiction.

Admittedly, I do carry a smartphone and participate in various forms of social media, but were I not a novelist with pesky marketing/branding responsibilities to worry about, I would probably be far less well-connected. I heartily enjoy my sessions of glorious unplugged solitude, the boundaries of which the latest idiotic political pronouncement or news of the massive identity theft du jour cannot penetrate. It's just me, my meandering thoughts, and that strange little gray alien who taunts me with encoded millimeter-wave transmissions from behind trees and shrubs.

It's not that I am virulently opposed to all manifestations of the social media demon. I in fact enjoy chatting with my friends and seeing their little triumphs and challenges chronicled: that sort of thing is an integral part of what it means to participate in human society. The idea that we must never be more than a hair's breadth distance from the global rete or somehow wither away does disturb me greatly, however. Breathing and posting to Instagram are not synonymous, the collective wisdom of the World Wide Web notwithstanding.

This obsession with constant interaction is, I suppose, a logical step on the path of human evolution. The science fiction archetype of the futuristic human with a huge pulsing-veined cranium is being replaced by one where the giant cranium is the Internet itself, with humans serving merely as data acquisition nodes, sensors the sole purpose of which is to feed the insatiable information appetite of our distributed id juggernaut. Eventually, analysis and retrieval of that information will fade in importance as mandatory incessant data collection becomes the goal in and of itself. Machines will not merely control us: they will define us as a species. In many ways they already do.

Oops, my phone just chirped. Gotta reply to this moron's comment about my new cat meme video. Later.