

Anchordesk

"Five rhetorical questions"

by Michael Finley

Computer User Columnist

Maybe I have been listening to too much talk radio. But lately my thinking has gotten awfully simple about some of the vexing problems of online life. I know the questions have complicated answers. But it feels good to break them down to simple-minded complaints:

Why do we allow viruses? Why don't we go after the makers of computer viruses with the same determination that we use to go after senders of anthrax? Why don't we form international coalitions to root this lower-case terrorism out, the way we do upper-case terrorism? The intention is the same, to cause harm and spread fear. I know it is hard to find these people, but when we manage to find one, we should make hellacious examples of them. It is a fundamentally antisocial thing to do, destroying people's life's work, research, and data treasure. Do we allow it simply so the makers of anti-virus products can make a living? I hope not..

Why don't we make Microsoft close its back doors? Every time I have gotten a virus, it's been because some hacker found yet another gaping hole in Microsoft's security. Why can't we hold Microsoft responsible for these stupid attacks? Have they ever even said "We're sorry"?

Why do we put up with entrapment? America Online deluges us with free disks. But if we take the bait and check the ISP out, and decide not to subscribe, there is no ready email link the visitor may use to say "No thanks." Since we never log on again, the odds of being charged for a month, a quarter, or even an entire year of unwanted service is very high. And AOL refuses to forgive bills for a service that is never used, even when a child did the visiting. Why do we tolerate such practices?

Why do we endure spam? Just clicking it all away is an invitation to repetitive stress injury. The only recourse is to change your email address, and that only works for a while. Why has Congress not passed a law against this invasion of privacy? Why haven't we created a new Internet standard that doesn't allow forged headers? 99.99% of the population despises spam. But evidently it is in someone's interest to maintain this absurd freedom to annoy -- and their wishes count more than ours.

Why do we permit porn pushing? I'm not out to rid the world of naughty pictures. Doggone it, naughty pictures can be nice. But must young children be assailed with popup windows, e-mail come-ons, and animated in-out sex banners? Why don't we make porn purveyors pull instead of push -- make them sell from a passive e-store, where we are free to visit them and examine their wares, but they can't leap unbidden onto our windshields?

These are rhetorical questions, of course. We'd all like to contain these pestilences. Respect for freedom constrains us from intervening effectively. But I am a lifelong libertarian, and if I am thinking these thoughts, you can believe that a mighty wave

is building for reform. If we don't act on these matters soon, the bad guys will do it for us.

To visit Mike, go to <http://mfinley.com/>, or write him at mfinley@mfinley.com

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