

36th Annual Report Relating to the ACM Risks Forum
For the Period 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021
Submitted by Peter G. Neumann

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To: The ACM Board, 1601 Broadway, 10th Floor, NY, NY 10019

The ACM Forum on Risks to the Public ('RISKS', which I began on 1 August 1985, at the request of the then ACM president Adele Goldberg), and the Inside Risks series of 251 articles in the Communications of the ACM (which began in July 1990) continued in the ACM fiscal year that just ended.

In addition to the ACM Risks Forum and the Inside Risks articles, I have contributed highlights from the online RISKS to each quarterly issue of the ACM SIGSOFT Software Engineering Notes ('SEN', for which I was the founding editor, in 1976). My 1995 book, Computer-Related Risks, was drawn heavily on materials from SEN and subsequently RISKS. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the risks considered in the book are still with us today in one form or another, and have actually increased in frequency and impact. The ACM Risks Forum had a new rebirth on 29 June 2021, when with some help from Dan Jacobson, I have been able to create a perl invocation that allows me to convert the raw text files with all sorts of crufty headers and encodings (e.g., =3D for an equals sign in a URL, =E2=E8=99 for an apostrophe, and \200 and \300 for foreign characters) automagically into the UTF-8 character set. This is a real blessing, because it eliminates an otherwise significant amount of manual editing.

During the 2020-2021 ACM reporting year, there were 69 issues (Volume 32 issues RISKS-32.06 through 32.74 of the ACM Risks Digest, some much larger than in previous years (due to considerably more submissions, and my SRI workload. However, I managed to keep our readers awake to computer-related risks during the pandemic -- and especially those related to COVID-19 itself.

RISKS issues are available online at <ftp.sri.com/risks/> and at www.risks.org (which redirects to a nicely formatted searchable site at the University of Newcastle in the UK, courtesy of Lindsay Marshall, who has retired but still shepherding the website), as well as on USENET (via Panix); it is also mirrored elsewhere around the world. The extent of its readership is considerable, but not easy to estimate. It continues to get new subscribers, and surprisingly has relatively fewer unsubscribers.

As noted previously, the CACM Inside Risks was initially a one-pager (on the Inside back page of the CACM, to add a pun to its identity as an Insider's view of Risks). The first 216 issues were monthly until June 2008, after which it has appeared as Viewpoint articles three times a year; the change was initiated by Moshe Vardi, who noted to me that the Inside Risks articles were the most popular in the CACM, and he wanted to use that space for other purposes. During the 2020-2021 reporting year, there were only two regularly scheduled columns:

* Oct 2020.250. Peter G. Neumann, A Holistic View of Future Risks:

Almost everything is somehow interrelated with everything else -- and that should not surprise us.

<http://www.csl.sri.com/neumann/cacm250.pdf>

* Jun 2021.251. Rebecca T. Mercuri and Peter G. Neumann, The Risks of Election Believability (or lack thereof):

With 90% of the 2020 US general election ballot contents verifiable by paper, why do only 65% of voters trust the results?

<http://www.csl.sri.com/neumann/cacm251.pdf>

The intended February column (number 251) initially seemed to be a potentially controversial topic following the November election; it needed the extra four months to make it as nonpartisan as possible under the circumstances -- rather than rushing it into the dedicated slot. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it seems to have received kudos from both sides of the spectrum for its balance and integrity!

These RISKS-related activities provide a highly visible public ACM activity (consistent with Adele Goldberg's original desire). They also serve vital educational roles, and provide useful resources for teachers, researchers, developers, and end-users.

Although the ACM Committee on Computers and Public Policy (CCPP) was transformed into a committee of the ACM Council by Cherri Pancake when she took over the reigns three years ago, the committee still exists for Risks-related activities; it still consists of Steve Bellovin, Peter Denning, Virgil Gligor, Kevin Fu, Nancy Leveson, David Parnas, Jerry Saltzer, Zeynep Tufekci, Lauren Weinstein, and Ben Zorn, after we added the two new members (Zeynep and Ben) several years ago.

Fortunately, they are all still present as extremely relevant and diverse advisors, primarily as a review board for potential Inside Risks articles, but also for dealing with any special considerations relating to the ACM Risks Forum.

Plans Through 30 June 2022

At Gabriele Kotsis's request, I was very happy to continue moderating the on-line ACM RISKS Forum, to commission and edit future Inside Risks columns.

I also contribute quarterly to the SIGSOFT SEN, closely related to the RISKS activity, as in the past 36 years -- but actually since I founded SEN in 1976.

The next CACM Inside Risks column -- slated for the October 2021 issue -- is currently shaping up as an analysis of risks in medical devices, by Kevin Fu (who has left the University of Michigan for a senior position in the FDA). This will be the 252nd Inside Risks column in the CACM. Kevin has some strong evidence that the FDA will be pleased to release it for publication, although if it takes a little longer.

Peter G. Neumann, Chief Scientist, Computer Science Laboratory,

SRI International EL-243, Menlo Park CA 94025-3493 E-mail addresses: Neumann@CSL.SRI.COM and PNeumann@acm.org for nonbusiness related communications

Website: <http://www.csl.sri.com/neumann>

Office phone: 1-650-859-2375 (although I still continue to work almost exclusively from home, at least for the time being)