More Honored in the Breach than in the Breeches

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My esteemed colleague Elizabeth Templeton and I share a good deal in common. Elizabeth, who is the Administrative Director of the MSIA program at Norwich University <http://www.msia.norwich.edu/overview.htm>, was a programmer supporting PeopleSoft client/server applications and before that spent many years in the New York metropolitan area as a mainframe applications programmer and technical consultant in a wide variety of corporate settings. She has additional experience in technical training, technical writing and workshop facilitation and has taught mainframe COBOL programming to adults. Another point of similarity is that both she and I have a long history of working with the English language; she has taught English composition to high school students and serves as one of our chief editors in the School of Graduate Studies. For my part, I have been a technical editor in English since 1972.

Recently Elizabeth wrote to me in exasperation: “What campaign can we launch to make writers stop using the word _breeches_ when the word they want is _breaches_?”

For the record, “breeches” (also spelled “britches”) are trousers – pants – the things you wear on your legs. “Breach” means “a failure to maintain something: a failure to obey, keep, or preserve something such as a law, trust, or promise (e.g., a breach of confidentiality; a hole in something that is caused by something else forcing its way through; a gap that results when somebody or something leaves” (Microsoft® Encarta® 2006).

A quick search on GOOGLE with the string “security breech” brought up 573,000 hits. For example, Michael Kerntke in the Chief Information Office of University of Connecticut entitled a report “Server Security Breech” when “On June 20, 2005 University Information Technology Services received notification from a non-University corporation that an invalid logon attempt had originated from a computer within the University of Connecticut domain. This automated notification was investigated by UITS technical staff and it was discovered that a hacking incident had resulted in an unauthorized program, known as a rootkit, being installed on a UITS data center server.” <http://itsnews.uconn.edu/2005/serverbreech.html> Alert readers will note that the URL even includes the misspelling.

Other examples:


Finally, in my own grading of undergraduate and even graduate students’ essays, I have too often seen the same problem:

- “Management can better prepare for such a breech. . . .”
- “. . . national laws such as SOX, HIPPA [sic], and state breech notification laws. . . .”
- “. . . potential loss should a breech occur.”
- “Internal examiners should treat each security breech claim. . . .”

So here’s my response to Elizabeth: a column read by 56,000 information security and network management professionals. Get with it, folks: STOP MISUSING THE WORD “BREECH” WHEN YOU MEAN “BREACH.”

Pull up your britches, everyone! As Hamlet might have said under these circumstances, “This is a spelling more honored in the breach than in the observance.”

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