After I sent in the last two articles about papers-for-purchase, I remembered a couple of stories that might amuse readers even though they are far from the normal course of discussion of network and enterprise security. Consider these two simply as amusing stories of fraudsters caught in their own lies and as a little break from the serious stuff I usually write about.

The first case occurred when I was a graduate student working in the laboratory of a distinguished scientist. There were always several graduate students under his direction working on doctoral thesis research, and one of them who arrived a couple of years into my time there was a very nice fellow whom I will call Hank (of course I’m masking all the details). Hank and his wife were lovely people and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them. They were honest, hard-working mid-westerners and my wife and I liked their sense of humor and their friendly openness.

Hank did excellent work on his research project and was known for his neatness and lack of clutter. We had a lot of glassware in our lab, and the nature of the little fresh-water invertebrates we worked on were very sensitive to contaminants, so we would do mind-numbing routines like washing the glassware in non-ionic detergent, rinsing everything ten times in hot tap water, rinsing it ten time in distilled water and finally rinsing it ten times in double-distilled water (this is where I learned Monty Python by heart – I used to listen to tapes of the British comedians while spending hours on the glassware). Hank was famous for never once breaking anything and for always having his equipment perfectly racked after his experiments.

Yep, neat and tidy: it became evident to our professor that the reason everything was neat and tidy was that Hank was not actually performing any experiments at all. He was making up all the results without the bother of doing the work. He was thrown out of graduate school in disgrace and his wife divorced him shortly thereafter.

Incidentally, if you ever have any questions about the validity of numerical data (e.g., accounting results or quality-control data), there are well-established techniques for identifying made-up or extensively modified data. Forensic accounting techniques, which can be applied to experimental data as well, include such techniques as verifying that the digits in the data are randomly distributed (e.g., using goodness of fit tests) and tests of independence in the numerical sequences (Markov chaining tests).

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The second incident occurred when I was teaching in my native language at a French-language university in 1978-9. One day I received a term paper from a student and burst into laughter when I turned the page from the cover page to the second page. I showed the paper to my chairman and he laughed immediately too. So we called the student in for questioning (remember, this is all in French – which will become significant shortly).
Trying as best we could to keep straight faces, we asked him if he had written the paper. Oh yes, he said, he had written it. “Every word?” we asked. “Yes indeed!” he answered.

So, I asked, “What is the title of the paper?” He had forgotten. “But you wrote it?” “Oh yes.”

My chairman asked, “What is the paper about?” The student had forgotten that too and complained that he was rattled by the situation. We assured him that we bore him no malice (we really didn’t – we were internally laughing at him, not angry).

“Why is the typewriter used on the cover page different from the typewriter used throughout the rest of the paper?” (That was the first clue that made us laugh.) Well, he had made a mistake on the cover page and had had to retype it on a different machine because he noticed the error later.

“But you wrote it all yourself?” Oh yes – and he vehemently said that he resented the accusation of dishonesty!

“Well then, could you please explain why every self reference in the paper is feminine?” (Here I have to explain that in French, if you write “I seated myself” it’s different for a man than for a woman: e.g., “Je me suis assis” vs “Je me suis assise.”) At that point he actually put his head down on the desk and admitted that he had submitted a paper written by his girlfriend.

Now THAT was a funny interrogation.

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