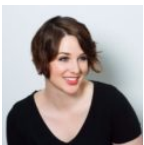




EXPLORATIVES TESTEN

Software Fail Watch: The Politics of Software Defects, Q2, 2018



CHELSEA FRISCHKNECHT

Software Failures

July 9, 2018

Q2 2018 offered no shortage of software defects. Headlines flashed across our screens and feeds daily – [4.8 million cars recalled](#), 675 American Airlines flights canceled, [450,000 women miss breast cancer screenings due to bug](#), etc. If you've been following the Software Fail Watch for some time, you'll recognize these stories as, unfortunately, being "the same old, same old". We hate that these glitches occur, their effects range from the inconvenient to the truly horrifying, but in the end...is anyone really surprised? If you pay attention to technology on the world scale, you'll have come to expect these headlines by now.

What caught our attention in Q2 were the "political bugs". We're not necessarily talking about politics as government (though that is a part of it) but rather, as the all-knowing [Wikipedia](#)

politics as government (though that is a part of it), but rather, as the all-knowing [Wikipedia](#) defines it, “the process of making decisions that apply to members of a group.”

Everything we do – ranging from how we act as individuals within a society, or a company, or a family – involves politics and policies. At the same time, society, as a whole, has become inescapably digitized.

That means that we should have figured out how to leverage digital technology to support, assist, and improve our primary political systems, right? Um...not so much. Many of the governing bodies and fundamental institutions that our society relies on (healthcare, law enforcement, etc.) have failed to effectively and efficiently leverage technology in their favor.

This creates a disconnect between the needs and goals of an organization, and the results they are actually able to deliver to the people they aim to serve. As this thoughtful [Gizmodo article](#) points out,

“Despite being more necessary than ever, digital literacy hasn’t permeated deeply into the folds of the government. As we’ve seen, public servants often lack the expertise to know how to critique and test technology, and return poorly designed or faulty technology for improvement. The solution isn’t teaching civil servants how to code but instead teaching what kinds of digital tools and products are usable, and what expectations they should have from a product so we can avoid failures like the IRS website. It’s not just a software problem but an understanding problem.”

An understanding problem. If you don’t understand something, it’s hard to “make [good] decisions that apply to members of a group.” This is where the intersection of politics and digitization gets really, really messy.

There were several bugs in Q2 that highlighted this fact.

Home Office told thousands of foreign students to leave UK in error

After a British news agency aired an investigative report into fraud regarding English tests – a prerequisite for specific British visas – the Home Office launched their own investigation. They worked with a company called Educational Testing Services (ETS) to review and analyze voice files from exams to identify whether people were cheating on the tests. ETS determined that 56,419 of the exams were, at minimum, suspected of being fraudulent. The Home Office had revoked 35,870 visas by the time it was discovered that ETS only had an 80% test accuracy rate – meaning that circa 7,000 innocent people had been stripped of their visas in error. [Read more.](#)

The subject of visa fraudulence, the use of software to catch people cheating on tests, and how

this information should be checked and applied are all still very much in question – and likely won't be concretely resolved any time soon.

When medical devices get hacked, hospitals often don't know it

Q1 2018 saw a record increase in medical device recalls, according to a study by the [Stericycle Recall Index](#). Two university-based doctors conducted a research project, placing doctors in situations where their medical equipment was hacked, then asking them if they believed their equipment was hacked. The answer was, unanimously, “No”. As Jeff Tully, one of the researchers stated, *“They have implicit trust, and they lack the infrastructure. It's a perfect set up for [medical devices] to be compromised.”* [Read more.](#)

Between legacy systems and devices, readily findable hardcoded device passwords, insufficient cybersecurity, and (importantly), lack of digital expertise, it's sobering but not surprising that hospitals and medical devices are so hack-prone. After all, a surgeon already has a daunting job – it's a lot to ask them to become cybersecurity watchdogs as well, however necessary it might be.

The IRS has fixed its glitch

The IRS online tax filing system fell victim to a software bug at the worst possible time: the day of the US national tax deadline. Parts of the e-filing, tax payment, and refund systems all went down early in the day, and were only back online shortly before the midnight deadline. The confusing website error message stated that this was a “planned outage”, scheduled to take place between April 17, 2018 and December 31, 9999 (or until September 22, 2016, depending on which part of the error message you paid attention to).

As the Vox article stated, “the IRS ought to be prepared for a last-minute rush of web traffic. In past years, the IRS site has often been the most visited government website in the week before taxes were due. In 2017, according to weekly IRS data, 13.6 million people filed their taxes online from April 15 to April 21, and 18.2 million people visited IRS.gov during that time.” [Read more.](#)

It's troubling to see significant governmental systems experience outages at such crucial times, but, once again, it shouldn't be surprising. We should be prepared, in advance, for such cases – and armed with a solution. But the likelihood is that until digital literacy becomes more deeply embedded into our political systems of all types, these types of bugs will continue to catch us unawares time and time again.

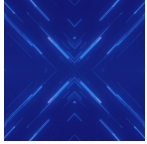
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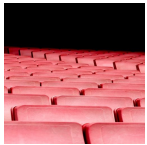
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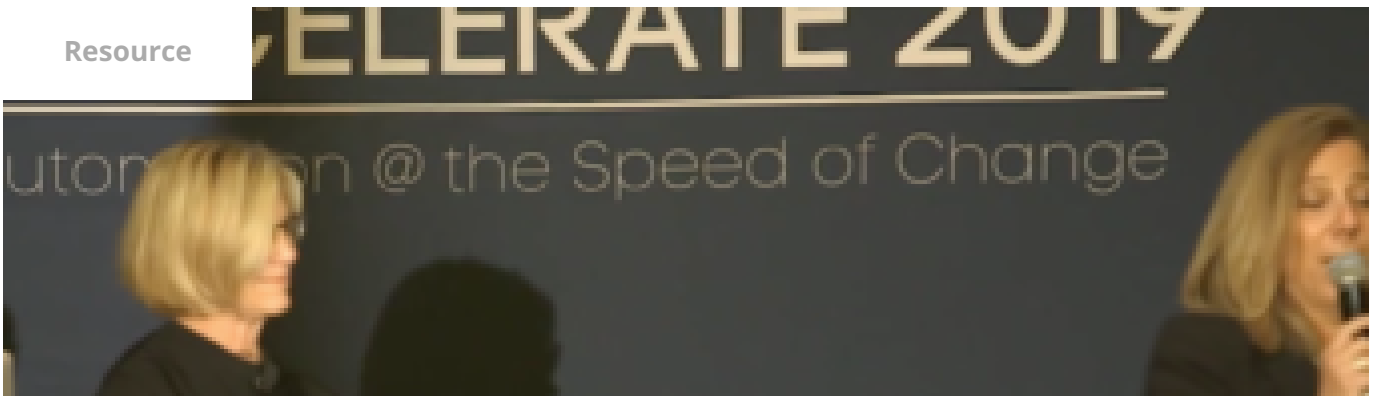


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