Regulations and responsibility

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Is the designer responsible for the effects of the device created? Is the manufacturer? What about the salesperson or the marketing department creating the demand? Is the user ultimately responsible?

Every tool and technology, no matter how mundane, has effects beyond the intended function. Let’s use a hammer as an example, a tool as old as people. The most obvious thing about a hammer is that it can perform many more tasks than simply driving a nail. A hammer can be used to forge metal, smash rocks, fight enemies, and even hold down paper, among its many other functions.

The use of a hammer isn’t without unintended consequences, however. Hammering something makes noise, often unpleasant to those in the immediate surroundings. (There are often regulations put in place in apartment buildings specifically to address this one factor.) Hammering creates vibrations that may affect another location and cause damage. The act of driving nails may create stress fractures in the walls they are driven into. You can miss your nail and crush your thumb. (You can also miss the nail and crush somebody else’s thumb.)

How do we decide the proper use of a tool? Can we make that decision for others? Should any attempt be made at regulating the use of a device? As mentioned above, even the lowly hammer is subject to control over its usage. What about a factory handling toxic chemicals? What about a dam upriver of a community? What about an oil rig offshore? What about a hedge-fund trading program residing on some bank’s mainframe?

Where do we draw the lines? Do we dare draw any? Must we draw lines? At what point does personal responsibility end and responsibility to our neighbors and community begin? Who decides? Should the engineering community make recommendations to the body politic as to what regulation should be in place? Should the business community?

As Joe Jackson famously sang, “You can’t get what you want until you know what you want”. We cannot even begin to properly regulate anything until we decide what we really want to accomplish and how best to achieve those goals. What do

you think about regulation?

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