

Case Study: Harris House of Horrors

Description



Harris Family Under Siege for Eight Years over a 'Minor Computer Glitch'

Staff Writer Hildy Johnson spent a week living in Laputa, Wisconsin with the Harris family, and it is a week she will never forget. She witnessed fear, frustration, fury, and forgiveness ... all over a small computer issue that has been causing chaos for this family for almost a decade.

AS REGULAR READERS will know, my own view on family life is that it can be hell, you just have to ask any of my four ex-husbands. So, when I spent a week with the Harris family, it became clear to me that there's no other way to look at their situation, they are under siege, and have been for years. Their home is visited at least once a day by law enforcement officers, they get hundreds of e-mails and phone calls (day and night), and they get over a hundred deliveries a month that are not intended for them, all because a "small technology issue". The physical location of their house has somehow been associated with the digital address 0.0.0.0 (this is called their *Eye Pea* or *IP address*, or so I'm informed), so they keep getting harried and harassed, day and night (by the police, by food deliveries, by parcel deliveries, and by process servers) because various computer companies put that IP address in as a default value if no other value is available, and mapping software points to the Harris house if the IP address 0.0.0.0 comes up. It doesn't help that their house sits on a meridian line as well, so sometimes in half of the house it's Tuesday and in the other half of the house it's Wednesday, so there's more room for confusion. You really have to see their life to believe it, but my purple prose will help give you some idea of their daily grind.

The Harris family consists of parents Billy and Donna, and their two sons, Buck and Harry. Billy is a dreamer, he thinks that these issues will be all solved somehow without his intervention (his favourite phrase is "everything will be alright"), but he doesn't seem to grasp what is happening to himself and his family. He doesn't want to deal with any of the issues, and he doesn't want to complain about the harassment that his family is suffering. His wife, Donna, is much more pragmatic, she is the one who must deal with most of the issues; answering the door to the various callers, and answering the phone to all who erroneously contact them. Their eldest son, Buck, is a high school football star, who was studying for an important Science examination over the week I spent with the family. Buck is a lot like his father, in a state of denial, he doesn't think this situation is a big problem, and that's mainly because he can sleep through anything, he sleeps through the constantly ringing doorbell, and the non-stop phone calls. Their youngest son, Harry, is

largely ignored by everyone else, but is very supportive towards his family, and is dealing with a lot of the technical issues, he is the only one who is in constant contact with the computer companies to get them to change their settings to stop harassing him family.

I arrived at the Harris residence at 9am on Saturday morning, and within ten minutes the doorbell rang. It was three Texas Rangers, led by Captain John Reid, who explained that a escaped criminal, Earl Williams, is on the run, and the Rangers' computer system, which is called "TONTTO" recommended that they travel to the Harris house, over one thousand miles away, to locate Williams here. Donna, Billy and Harry sit with Captain Reid and Donna explains that Williams isn't in their house, and whoever programmed TONTTO probably set the initial guess of the IP address of a crime or a criminal to 0.0.0.0, and the system would normally change that address to a new value once it figures out the real location. However, if the system isn't sure what location to suggest, instead of saying "*I don't know*", it just outputs the default IP address, which some mapping software systems translates to be the current location ... the Harris house. Captain Reid is taken aback, and asks Donna how she could possibly know that, to which she responds with great patience and dignity: "*Because we get at least thirty visitors a day to this house, and it's always the same problem, the mapping software sends people to this address if it doesn't know what else to do.*" As if to confirm her story, the doorbell rings just as she finishes speaking, and it's a pizza delivery van, from Pine City, Minnesota; the driver's GPS system sent him on a two-hour journey to the Harris house. The driver insists on being paid, even though neither the name nor the address on the pizza matches the Harris family. Harry gets a copy of a letter from their local law enforcement officer, Sheriff Hartman, explaining the situation in more detail. After a few minutes, the driver leaves irate, but Captain Reid is much more sympathetic and assures the family that he will do everything in his power to get this situation rectified; Billy is overjoyed, thanking the captain profusely, but Donna and Harry smile politely, they've heard this promise hundreds of times before.

Before noon of that day the we have had four more food deliveries, and have been served with divorce papers twice (neither of which were intended for them), and in each case Donna or Harry concisely explain the situation and give each caller to the house a copy of Sheriff Hartman's letter. At midday Buck joins us; he has just woken up, having slept through the morning's brouhaha. Billy excitedly tells Buck that all of their troubles are over, Captain Reid is going to fix everything for them. Buck responds positively to this news, but doesn't seem completely convinced. Donna and Harry look at each other, and their eyes roll simultaneously.

I decide to interview each of the Harris family individually to better understand the situation and the impacts it is having on these people. So, I start with Donna; we retire to the quietest place in the house, the back bedroom, with some iced teas, leaving Harry to deal with the door and phone calls. I start with a question that I don't feel is up to my usual exacting journalistic standards: "*What the heck is going on here?*", I ask. Donna smiles patiently and begins to explain the situation to me, using some terminology that I have never heard of, and I'm fairly sure should be banned from the English Language, like "*Geolocationary systems*", and something called "*Tea See Pea Eye Pea*". I follow up with the obvious question, and I get the obvious answer: "*Why don't you move?*", "*We can't afford to*". The more we speak the more clear it becomes that I haven't even scratched the surface in terms of the troubles this family has, not only are they wall-to-wall doorbells and phone calls, but their on-line lives are even in a worse state, Their social media is swamped with millions of friend requests and direct messages, because of this "minor glitch". They also get thousands and

thousands of e-mails a day, they are mostly error messages from various computers, but sometimes it's software licences that other people have subscribed to, but somehow end up in the Harris' e-mailbox. They also get credit card details destined for other people, and payments in cryptocurrencies. As a result of this particular issue, various computer companies and private individuals are pursuing legal action against the Harris family claiming that they are software pirates, IP squatters, identity thieves, computer scammers, and securities fraudsters. The Harris family spend at least two days a week in court defending themselves from these charges and depleting their meagre resources. At the same time, they are suing some of the larger companies, whose software causes the most problems for the Harris family. It is clear to me that Donna is in a state of exhaustion, she doesn't have a chance to think about anything other than dealing with today's problems today, and tomorrow's problems tomorrow, and her brain is so loaded, it will soon be exploded.

I was completely gobsmacked by this whole situation, and decided to forego my journalistic objectivity; so I rolled up my sleeves and got involved, I phoned my boss, Walter Burns, and asked him to commit our legal staff for two days a week to helping the family, which he agreed to do so for the next six months, I also noticed that a lot of the companies that are suing the Harris family are also the ones that were causing a lot of the problems for them. I recognised this strategy from an article I had written about computer companies a few years ago, they pay pennies for computer programmers to write sub-standard software, and at the same time they are willing to spend millions on legal teams to defend themselves against lawsuits caused by their shoddy software, even going as far as being willing to bankrupt people to defend their "good" name. I also noticed that the six largest computer companies (who own a lot of the software that are causing the Harris family a lot of problems, and they also own a lot of smaller software companies), are in practice separate companies, but have been acting as a single legal entity in some developing counties (calling themselves "The Consortium"), they therefore could be treated as a "joinder" (joint legal parties), and sued collectively. I was careful not to give Donna false hope, but I silently committed myself to doing everything I could to helping the Harris family.

For the rest of the day I volunteered to answer the door, and after the first hour I had the routine down pat; I hear the doorbell, I grab a copy of Sheriff Hartman's letter, answer the door, explain the situation to the visitor, give them the letter, and ask them to sign the Visitors Book at the door, just in case there needs to be a record of their visit for later legal proceedings. After a while I hung a sign on the door saying "*Doorbell broken, please knock and enter*", so as not to have to hear the bell ringing all the time.

The following day I had my interview with Billy, it was one of the most frustrating interviews of my life, he is full of talk, full of ideas and full of plans, but completely unwilling to make an effort to achieve his goals. He reminds me of one of my ex-husbands, Blaine, who was going to fix a broken shelf in our house (he was too busy today, but would definitely get to it tomorrow) for the three years we were married. I asked Billy what he thought about the situation he was in, and where did he see it all ending. He had extremely evasive and fanciful answers, telling himself (more so than me) that everything was going to be alright, that success was just around the corner, and things were never as bad as they seemed. He did talk a lot about his father, Dan, who was very a very successful businessman when he was alive and a big inspiration to Billy, particularly in his choice of career, becoming a salesman. As the conversation continued, I stopped listening to Billy, and instead tried to imagine what could possibly be convincing Donna to stay married to this useless fool, I would have divorced him as soon as I met him. Later that day I spoke to Donna about my conversation,

and I could feel her frustration with her husband, but when I asked Donna why she stays with Billy, she responded, almost pleadingly, “*because I love him*”, which seemed like the most hopeless answer I had ever heard. That night I heard Donna and Billy have a furious row about their problems, and I have to admit I was proud of Donna.

After a few more days of door duty, I got a chance to have a long and detailed conversation with Harry about the state of affairs, and he had a lot to say. It became clear to me that Harry understands the mechanics of what’s going on more than anyone, and that he is an incredibly responsible young man who is doing his best for his family. He has become extremely knowledgeable about computers and is willing to spend 10 hours a day dealing with the legal and technical issues, and has put aside his dreams of enlisting in West Point until he has dealt with the situation he finds himself in. In a sense he is the mirror image of his father, he is grounded in reality, and is able to suppress his dreams for the greater good of his family, whereas his father has his head in the clouds and can do nothing but dream. Harry explains that although the issue of the software systems returning the IP address of 0.0.0.0 is a problem, the real issue is mainly with one software mapping company, TendreMaps, whose software system is used by a wide range of law enforcement agencies, federal agencies, and lots of large commercial organisations; their software is used to transform IP addresses into a physical geographic locations, and they are the company that is mapping 0.0.0.0 to the Harris house. Harry spends hours every day responding to various e-mails (including returning monies to people and responding to queries). I put Harry in touch with a friend of mine, a master hacker named Henry Dorsett Case, who I hope can help this family. And following a conversation between the two of them, Harry comes to me smiling and full of gratitude, he thinks that with Henry’s help, he will be able to fix some of the major issues.

Two days later is my last day with the Harris family, and I still haven’t had a chance to speak to Buck in detail, he was either sleeping or training for his next big game (and pretending to study for his big Science exam), but I did manage to get 15 minutes with him before my departure, and it was a waste of time. He is like his dad in many ways, completely oblivious to the problems of his family, he doesn’t care about the strain that is being put on his family, and is only interested in his football career, and his popularity in school. I ask him why he doesn’t help out more and he says: “*That’s Mom and Harry’s stuff, they love the drama of the whole thing, look, in the end everything will be alright*”. To my credit I don’t punch him, and then I realise that Donna and Harry spend most of their time on the east side of the house, and Billy and Buck on the west side of the house, split by the meridian. The two sides of the house are running on different times and it’s the same with the two halves of the family, in completely different time zones.

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Just before this article went to press, a few noteworthy events occurred: Buck failed his Science exam, Donna kicked Billy out of the house and he moved into an apartment with Buck. The legal team from this newspaper helped Donna come to a settlement with the Consortium, they gave her over \$53 million, with no admission of liability. Donna and Harry have moved to Beverly Hills, and strangest of all, the mapping company TendreMaps still hasn’t done anything to fix the problems that their system is causing, but some hackers have changed the mapping of IP address 0.0.0.0 to the headquarters of TendreMaps, who now get hundreds of unwanted calls a day ... like I always say, it’s strange how things work out!

Questions

1. Do the programmers who wrote the software that set the default IP address to 0.0.0.0 bear responsibility to what happened to the Harris family? Why?
2. Does the TendreMaps Mapping Company bear responsibility to what happened to the Harris family? Why?
3. When the Harris family got internet access in their house they signed a contract with Terms & Conditions that clearly state that there is no liability for any problems caused by errors in software, even if such agreements are legal, are they ethical? Why?
4. Hildy suggests that computer companies pay their computer programmers poorly, but at the same time spend millions on legal teams to defend themselves. Is this a good business model? Why?
- 5.** Some people have suggested that Harry worked with Henry Dorsett Case to redirect the mapping from the Harris House to the TendreMaps headquarters, if so, do you think it was justified? Why?