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Will cyber hackers create an electronic Pearl Harbour?

Could utility, transport and communication systems be hacked in a cyber-attack leading to widespread destruction? This is the question which will be asked during a debate being held at the British Science Festival next week.

The session was convened in response to a statement by Leon Panetta, the former US Secretary of Defense, who warned last year that the United States was increasingly vulnerable to foreign computer hackers who could gain control of critical power, transportation, financial and governmental systems leaving the country at risk of a "Cyber-Pearl Harbour". Christopher Laing, a

Teaching Fellow at Northumbria University who specialises in digital security, will chair a debate which will consider how credible the threat of a cyber-attack could be on a nation's critical infrastructure.

Christopher Laing explained: "Leon Panetta painted a picture of the consequences of such an attack as one of destruction on a massive scale; 'trains loaded with lethal chemicals being derailed', 'water supplies of major cities being contaminated', 'physical destruction and loss of life'.

"Admittedly increasing demands for remote access mean that Internet Protocols are starting to replace the older proprietary standards. This could mean that such critical systems are now vulnerable to the same malware that affect mainstream computer systems, while bespoke malware could be specifically developed to bring about infrastructure degradation.

"But is the picture painted by Pancetta made up of cold hard realities or political deception? In this debate we are bringing together experts from both sides of the spectrum – those who believe the threat is real and credible and those who believe it is simply political hyperbole. I'm expecting this to be quite a feisty session given such opposing views."

Christopher will chair a panel that will include those who work in the security industry, members of the press, and fellow academics, but as he points out: "This is not just about the panel, the audience will be able to join the debate and using handheld voting devices will be able to state whether they agree, or disagree with the politicians' position on the effects of a cyber-attack."

A Cyber Pearl Harbour: Fact or Fiction will be held as part of the British Science Festival at the Spence Watson Lecture Theatre, in Newcastle University's Armstrong Building, on Monday 9 September at 2.30pm. Entry is free but guests are asked to book their place at www.britishsciencefestival.org

The British Science Festival is an annual celebration of science, engineering and technology which visits a different UK city each year. The Festival is organised by the British Science Association and this year is being hosted by Newcastle University with Northumbria University and Newcastle City Council as associate partners and AkzoNobel, Northumbrian Water, GE Oil & Gas and Saudi Aramco as major sponsors. The Festival will take place in different venues in and around the city from Saturday 7 September through to

Thursday 12 September.

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