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Building Robust Shared Administration

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In many envionments, administration is shared among several administrators, split along functional areas. This process is most pronounced in computer-science research environments, where users must possess administrative privileges in order to perform their research. This arrangement is problematic, at best. Researchers are often poorly versed in site security policies and large scale infrastructure issues. In this setting, administration is frequently split into two discrete parts: a production supported environment (a "green" environment) and a research environment (a "red" environment).

Red systems (and networks) cause trouble for administrative staff, while providing less functionality to users.

As opposed to this hard division between administrative domains, the MCS systems team has developed a series of policies and technical measures that organize this process. The result is a clear set of responsibilities for all parties and tools to ensure that things work smoothly.

In this talk, we discuss the important aspects of this approach, describing the overall model, key technical issues, and compromises we needed to make in order to build a workable process. This talk is applicable to any group that needs to perform administration with shared responsibilities in either a research or production setting.

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