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When the Internet Goes Away…

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About

We have been in our Winter term 8-week publishing hiatus at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies. This is a time when we work as much or more than during the regular year, but at a variety of tasks not possible during the Fall and Spring terms. It is a time when key student staff members may go abroad for additional study, or take vacation jobs so as to be able to afford a private college like ours.

I again spent this interim in China, working at Wenzhou Medical College in the Shanghai region. There I both teach Chinese students and work on the many activities sponsored by the Berglund Center which involve exchanges between programs in education, optometry, and the liberal arts in which the two schools increasingly cooperate.

This year in China we got a unique view of the impact of the Internet. I will avoid the usual statistics on Chinese Internet growth, legal issues, impact on daily life, because the primary impact we experienced was that the Internet all but went away for several days and then ran agonizingly slowly for the following weeks.

There was an undersea quake off Taiwan just before Christmas. This was a major tectonic shift, and six of the seven digital cables between Asia and the United States were broken. The remaining loop, unfortunately, passed through Korea; unfortunately, because the high number of Korean gamers had already taxed it beyond capacity.

It was quickly driven home to those who depended upon digital communications to function in Asia that things had changed. Cell phone signals, we learned, are also digital data packets carried on those cables. Even some satellite feeds depended at some point on the cables. One can only imagine the impact among traders at the many Asian bourses, some of the busiest in the world. Bankers and business people in Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Shanghai, were suddenly staring at screens that would not refresh, and stabbing at keyboards without apparent effect.
It was not that the World Wide Web went dark. In some ways, that might have been best. As it was, not knowing what had happened, my first impulse was to swear creatively at my own equipment, to crawl around among the Chinese dust bunnies checking connections, repeatedly reboot, performing all the propitiatory rituals of Internet life. But the Internet gods turned a blank face, doubtless themselves puzzled, if only until Virtual Poseidon reported in.

While the web did not go away, it slowed to a crawl. A very sloooow crawl. I was daily exchanging dozens of email with friends and colleagues, principally in the United States, but in Europe as well. Suddenly those signals became so slow that email applications or servers would time-out, perceiving that transmissions had ended. Some users laughed that this was like the dial-up days, but it was far worse. Out of curiosity I tried to run a speed check on my line, but so far as the U.S. servers running the measuring applications were concerned, I had no signal at all... they dropped my feeble attempts to communicate.

It was to be some days before we learned what had happened. In this period we got to see ourselves under unfamiliar conditions, as though the power and heat had failed for a week. And of course, communications within China were not affected. I was planning a trip to south China to give a scholarly presentation and that email went sailing through, once I accessed a Yahoo account. Presumably Yahoo had servers in China.

One phenomenon I observed, both in myself and in the 3-4 American teachers with whom I interacted on a daily basis, was that we all tended to blame the Chinese—first the school—then the service provider—then we spun conspiracy tales about why we couldn’t access this site or that. In my case, it was The New York Times —some new Chinese firewall policy? Had there been some dreadful incident in China that the government was trying to keep from the world? Were we victims of the world’s first deliberate Internet slowdown?

We all took it very personally. This was our problem! Moreover, the Internet breakdown easily became the scapegoat for everything that was challenging about life in China. Fortunately, unlike some equally paranoid agencies, the only thing nuclear about us was our collective anger.

Finally, I became truly the ugly American, goaded by my inability to get anything done or to check up on affairs at the Berglund Center. I threatened to move to a hotel with decent business services if the university did not give me my own private data line. And they did... I had my own totally private ADSL connection within several days, which, of course, made little or no difference as the problems were off shore.

Many of these problems were only temporary for business services in Asia. Just as satellite data packets were in some cases traveling by undersea cable, so could much of that traffic be routed through satellites. I assume that the skies were soon tingling with repurposed data channels and that even the very advanced birds themselves were being steered into more advantageous orbits. So for those with big budgets, the problems soon went away.
Hong Kong currency arbiters were again shouting cheerfully in several languages, probably selling the Internet short and going long on satellite communications, thus more than compensating for the unfortunate position they had held... and held... and held... on the Vietnamese Dong.

But the earth bound among us had no idea what was wrong. Finally Chinese friends began reporting the problem. We responded, of course, with initial disbelief: “Yeah, sure! Undersea earthquakes! Maybe a dragon bit the cables!”

As I left on January 17, more than three weeks after the quake events, the Internet was still slow. I presume that by now it is back to normal.

However, the event taught me several lessons, which I presume to share with you here. The Internet is now necessary. Those who talk about the golden era of easily managed data, the days when pornography came with staples through its collective abdomens, when students had to go to the library for research, should try turning the Internet off for a few days, or even worse, try turning it down. Not only do we want our digital data, we want it NOW!

And why oh why couldn’t some agency have told us all what the heck was going on? Google search page came up, sort of, but the searches themselves would not proceed in most cases. I know that I do not want an überagency pushing messages over the Internet to all of us, because I fear the possible abuses, of course. But some kindly equivalent of school closings due to inclement weather would certainly have been welcome.

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2 THOUGHTS ON “WHEN THE INTERNET GOES AWAY...”

http://Thecamerafactory.com/2_Accessories.html on January 31, 2014 at 2:10 PM said:

Hello everyone, it’s my first pay a visit at this site, and piece of writing is really fruitful in favor of me, keep up posting these types of articles.

nigeria entertainment news on February 4, 2014 at 10:29 AM said:

I truly enjoy searching through on this internet site , it has superb blog posts. “I have a brand new philosophy. I’m only heading to dread a single day at a time.” by Charles M.
Schulz.