KGB Report

July 26, 1999

A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology,
Featuring the Stuff You Really Need To Know

Immunocation: Paradoxically, the constant improvement in digital communications technology has resulted in the creation of *immunocation*: the use of technology to deliberately limit one's exposure to stuff that matches one's narrow interests. Consider TV. With the advent of hundreds of cable and satellite channels, true broadcast television is almost extinct. In the 1970s, a network television show with a 20 "share", watched by only 20% of in-use televisions, was almost certainly destined for cancellation. Last week, the highest-rated broadcast network, NBC, averaged only a 12 share and a rating of 6.3. Each ratings point represents 994,000 households, or 1 percent of the nation's estimated 99.4 million homes with television. So, where is everyone? Immunocating... watching specialized cable channels or self-absorbingly surfing the Internet. Broadcasting was replaced by narrowcasting, and narrowcasting has been superceded by egocasting, programs directed to demographic segments so specific the database of targeted individuals can fit in a small spreadsheet. A&E has spun off *The Biography Channel*, a service featuring mostly reruns of its signature series and apparently aimed at those tired of *Law and Order* repeats four times a day. Cartoon Network will start another channel restricted to airing old limited animation Hanna-Barbera series. Are there actually people who want a channel dedicated to crappy cartoons? A Warner Bros channel I can understand, but a station airing nothing but Ruff 'n Ready, Scooby-Doo, The Herculoids, Birdman and Super President? As for the Internet, portal sites and news services allow users to filter out everything but those highly limited subjects of intense personal interest. I swear some people were probably unaware of the death of JFK Jr. until morbid memorabilia starting appearing for sale on eBay. I wouldn't be surprised if armed conflict breaks out between those who feel the Dick Sargent Darrin Stevens was better than the Dick York Darrin Stevens on the old *Bewitched* series. No wonder the populace is so woefully ignorant of major issues. The solution? Check back next week. I think C-SPAN 2 is going to have a show about it Tuesday morning at 3:15 am. I'll let you know.

It's nice being read? It's gratifying to learn people actually read what you write, but there can be surprising side effects. If you recall, last week's newsletter featured an item on the use of obscene words in web addresses. While reviewing our web site log, I noticed a referral from a site with a name that would cause my grandmother's eyeballs to implode and fall out of her head. Out of curiosity, I entered www.**********.com into the web browser and was stunned to see *our* home page appear. Some KGB reader bopped on over to web.com, created a web site with a toe-curling name and stuck in some html that referred surfers to www.kgb.com. A quick e-mail to web.com's administrators severed the link and shut down the site, and I believe they'll be filtering new names from this point forward. To my secret admirer: thanks for the support, but a paid subscription to the print edition of the newsletter would be appreciated even more.

Not An Issue? Speaking of questionable web content, it appears parents aren't really too concerned about what their children see on the Internet. A *PC Magazine* online survey revealed a whopping 87% of families' web access includes no parental filtering whatsoever. Three percent use light filtering, five percent moderate filtering, and five percent heavy filtering. It will be interesting to see how many parents actually use the new V-Chip censoring technology now being built into televisions.

The Last Word on Cable Modems: Avoid them, for two reasons: bandwidth limitations and security problems. Remember what cable television networks were originally designed to do: distribute one signal or a set of signals to as many locations as possible. When you start re-engineering that big one-way pipe to handle lots of signals going in all directions, you're asking for trouble. Think about the disaster AT&T is experiencing in New York with its much-hyped Digital One Rate cellular phone service. The plan was grossly oversold, the network can't handle the demand, and many callers simply cannot not place calls during prime hours. The potential for an even greater catastrophe exists with cable access to the Internet. There's a limited amount of stuff you can pump through a hunk of coax. Lots of folks have made comments about the unexpected low quality of the recently introduced digital cable channels, a direct result of lossy signal compression and limited bandwidth. Imagine what will happen when zillions of folks start linking their PCs to the same cable. Early adopters who bragged about the impressive speed of their cable modem connection are now experiencing highly degraded performance as new users suck up bandwidth. In some systems, the cable company arbitrarily (and secretly) limits transfer speeds to tweak capacity, and users complain transfers slow to a crawl during the 6 pm-midnight peak home use period. Also, unless you've made special arrangements with the cable company, forget about connecting a server to their network. Actually, you probably wouldn't want to, anyway. As bad as the potential performance limitations of cable modems are, security issues are even worse. When you connect to the Internet using a cable modem, you're actually joining a local area network. On some cable systems, you can click on Network Neighborhood and actually see all your neighbors' systems connected to the cable segment you're using. Unless the owners of those systems have file and print sharing turned off, you could possibly access the hard drives and printers of those machines. Even worse, if one of those users happens to be connected to an improperly configured system at his or her workplace, you can actually connect to the business' system, regardless of its location. Of course, it's illegal to do so, but there are some individuals unfettered by such niceties as ethics and conscience. Like the headbanger who lives across the street who's really cheezed at you for calling the cops when he blew up your mailbox during a late night pyrotechnics experiment. Do you really want this guy poring over your Quicken files and looking at the photos in your web browser's cache? He might be able do pull it off since your cable modem has a static Internet address that's probably just a digit or two different than his. (You were assigned an almost unhackable random address when you used a traditional Internet service provider over dial-up telephone lines.) You can limit your exposure by turning off your computer when it's not in use, turning off print and file sharing, and obtaining firewall software to keep intruders out. Better still, wait to see how the industry handles infrastructure and security issues when reports of the inevitable major disasters hit the mass media.

Arcane Info: A great source of bizarre information is Lindsay Publications, Inc. in Bradley, IL (815-935-5353), which sells reprints of ages-old technical books and publications aimed at individuals with unusual interests. Some topics covered by Lindsay's books include: working with vacu-formed plastic, homebuilt regenerative radio receivers, home sausage making, outdoor survival skills, birdhouse construction, how to build a 40,000 volt induction coil, theory and construction of sundials, armature winding and motor repair, video scrambling and descrambling, and preserving the dead. Everything you need to be a well-rounded human being, or a character in a Robert Heinlein novel.

Hello, Howard: Both my mother and son listen to Howard Stern's radio show and have been bugging me about listening in. I've never indulged, primarily because the eight or so computers in my office generate so much electronic noise they block the signal of the station carrying the syndicated show. So, I bopped over to the local Radio Shack to find a receiver sensitive enough to sift through the static. I ended up getting a Freeplay radio, which is being sold on the Internet as "Y2K-compliant"

because it's self-powered. It has a novel built-in generator run by a crank-activated spring motor, as well as photoelectric cells for solar power. The unit is amazingly sensitive. I was able to pick up stations my top-end receiver with digital signal processing and amplified antenna couldn't even detect. The circuit board in the South African-built Freeplay looks like it was designed in the 1960s. It has discrete transistors, big RF coils and stuff that appears to have been salvaged from old tube-powered car radios. I expected sparks and the smell of ozone. The Freeplay has a transparent shell, so you can spend hours amusing yourself watching the gears spinning as the set plays, which is convenient during the long breaks on Stern's show. Radio Shack sells the Freeplay for under $80; I've seen Y2K fear mongers asking for up to $125 on the net. The unit also runs on an optional AC adapter, although I prefer using the wind-up generator. There's a certain symmetry in listening to Stern's callers on a crank radio.

Quotes of the Week:

"While it is the camel at the front of the caravan that holds everything up, it is the ones at the back that get the beating."-Ethiopian Proverb

"Good health is simply the slowest way to die."-Unknown

"Nutrition makes me puke."-Jimmy Piersall

"Discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy, and you've got an audience."-Diogenes

"It does no harm just once in a while to acknowledge that the whole country isn't in flames, that there are people in the country besides politicians, entertainers, and criminals."-Charles Kuralt

"In our family we don't divorce our men, we bury them."-Ruth Gordon

Trivia: "ACA out of detent. Mode control, both auto" were the actual first words spoken by a human being on the moon. Buzz Aldrin made the transmission immediately after the lunar module *Eagle* touched down. Not quite as memorable as "Tranquility Base here. The *Eagle* has landed," but historically accurate. Congratulations to winner Jason Maluccio of Hudson Falls, New York. This week's question: what are the confetti-like paper fragments punched out of cards or paper tape called, and what's the origin of the name?

Useless Web Sites of the Week: So, you think you're a candy bar expert, eh? For a humbling experience, look at http://www.smm.org/sln/tf/c/crosssection/namethatbar.html at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Your job, should you decide to accept it: identify candy bars by looking at full-color cross-sectional photographs. Things must get pretty boring in Minnesota.

Y2K-A-Rama

To Hell With Y2K...What About Today?? Major computer outages and failures occur on a daily basis, and life goes on. At least Y2K is a known problem. Some recent incidents that blindsided the computer dependent:

Shuttle Woes: It took three tries for NASA to successfully launch the shuttle *Columbia* last week. On the first attempt, a defective hydrogen sensor erroneously reported a fuel leak, forcing an abort. The second try was scuttled by an unexpected thunderstorm. *Columbia* did make it off on the third attempt, but not without a host of problems. A faulty communications link briefly delayed lift-off. Nine seconds into the flight, an electrical short-circuit knocked out the primary computers which controlled two of the shuttle's three main engines. Backup computers took over immediately and kept the spacecraft on course. The shuttle may have been leaking hydrogen fuel all the way into space, causing the engines to shut down early, placing *Columbia* in an orbit seven miles lower than desired, and risking an explosion and emergency landing. Finally, a video screen failed, forcing the crew to use other displays for data readouts. At least the NASA folks maintained their sense of humor. Astronaut Steve Hawley, who's experienced 13 launch delays in his career, pulled a brown paper bag

over his head before boarding the shuttle, and several workers hid their faces behind sheets of white paper.

Oops: The *Washington Post* reported the CIA sold 25 used laptops at a public auction recently, but forgot to delete the top-secret data recorded on their hard drives. The agency became aware of the gaffe only after one of the buyers discovered classified information on his newly purchased machine.

No Problem: Experts quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* aren't concerned about the Y2K bug affecting Russian nuclear power plants, since the computers controlling the facilities "are so primitive that Y2K is unlikely to have much impact." There, don't you feel better?

Survey Says: An AP survey shows two thirds of Americans are expecting only minor Y2K-related problems, one-third plan on stocking up on food and water, and a quarter plan on keeping extra cash on hand. Women are more concerned about Y2K issues than men (38 to 23 percent) and more black people plan to take precautions than others (42 to 29 percent). Overall, 18 percent expected no trouble at all, while 11 percent were girding for a major disaster. Persons 65 and older were twice as likely to expect no difficulties. Hey, they lived through the Depression, World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the proliferation of talk radio. What's a malfunctioning ATM to them?

Shameless Self-Promotion: Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Also, properly attributed *KGB Report* items make handy and entertaining column fillers and broadcast media spots (hint, hint).

The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ Now Available! Nobody knows what the dickens is really going to occur on Y2KDay, but the odds are about a million to one that anything bad will happen to you personally. You say that's not good enough, bunkie? Step right up, here's the answer to your problem! Through the miracle of modern mathematics, you can virtually eliminate the chance of any Y2K calamity visiting upon your person by purchasing and wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™. It works by exploiting the elegant if little understood concept of statistical probability. Now here's the deal... The odds of getting personally zapped by a Y2K bug, according to various generally reputable mass media sources, are, as we previously noted, about a million to one. But the odds of getting zapped... *while wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™*... are virtually incalculable! Do the math yourself! See what we mean? In order for The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ to maintain its statistical validity, it's necessary to restrict the seeded universe (the number we sell) to... wait a minute... carry the two... say, 100,000. At a mere 20 bucks, it's the best insurance you can buy! Each beanie is unique, hand-modified to further increase the odds against personal catastrophic happenstance! No two are alike! Beware of inferior, mass-produced Y2K Remediation Headgear™... those duplicate beanies may save you a few bucks, but do you dare tamper with the delicate mathematical balance of our pristine calculations? Don't muck around with celestial mechanics, my friends! Accept only The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™! Plus, it'll be a great way to break the ice at that New Year's Party! The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ is more attractive than a lampshade, not to mention far more functional! Order The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ now, save your butt, beat the odds, and make a timely fashion statement! Call KGB Consulting at 412-854-2550, fax us at 412-854-4707, or e-mail us at kgb@kgb.com. Act now! Visa and MasterCard accepted! Quantities will be strictly limited to the number we can sell, so hurry!

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