KGB Report

August 9, 1999

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

They're Here! Just in from the printer, the Y2K KGB Consulting Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar! See the special insert in the mailed edition of the KGB Report, or check out our new *Desperate Sideline Enterprises* web page at http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html, which also features our new line of Curmudgeon Tees!

Don't Get Shocked: Just how reliable is reliable? Web site hosting services frequently claim 99% uptime, but that really means you can expect your site to be inaccessible for almost four days a year. The *Wall Street Journal* notes that if an electric utility boasts its system provides 99.9% reliability, you'll experience 8.7 hours of power outages annually. Of course, that's just a rough estimate. In 1998 we experienced over 13 hours of outages, due primarily to storm damage and morons driving their cars into utility poles. Excluding the Big Storm two weeks ago, this year we had no outages greater than 10 seconds in length, which sounds pretty good. However, we have had to date over 100 power "glitches", or fluctuations in phase or voltage that caused the uninterruptible power supplies (UPS) on our computer systems to kick in. We experienced variations between 82 and 140 volts and three instances in which a leg of our three-phase service disappeared for a moment or so.

If you have a computer, be certain you have it connected to a UPS. Most computer hardware failures are caused by power problems, and the growing gap between electrical supply and demand means that longer, more frequent outages can be expected. A UPS system can also serve as a power quality alarm. A couple years ago, the UPS systems in our house went nuts, repeatedly cycling on and off. It was really confusing, since none of the lights or other electrical appliances appeared to be affected. To be on the safe side, we cut the main power into the house and I went outside to check the big transformer that sits in the middle of my driveway and supplies power to my house and three other homes downstream from us. This thing was making an ominous throbbing noise like the warp core in starship. I called the power company, and told the laid-back tech who arrived that I thought something was seriously wrong with the transformer. "I can guarantee you it's not the transformer," he said. "Those things are indestructible."

Just then, the indestructible device emitted a loud pop, a cloud of white smoke and began issuing an amazing gurgling noise that caused our dogs to flee into the basement, tails between their legs. The tech flinched visibly, dived into his truck and started yelling into his radio as he burned rubber and sped away. Shortly thereafter he returned with a couple of other vehicles and a crane, and the utility replaced the transformer.

Interestingly, the utility workers did not inform my three downstream neighbors that the now-defunct transformer had been wreaking havoc with the electrical devices in their homes. I *did*, however, and my report explained the dead appliances, answering machines and air conditioners they discovered when they returned from work at the end of the day. The utility paid for the damages, but only because I had finked on them. Moral: get a UPS and pay attention to it. Postscript: most UPSes are designed to supply the special switched power supplies found in computers. Don't try to run a television or other device that requires "clean" power from a UPS. And be certain to follow the manufacturer's instructions for testing and replacing the UPS batteries.

Buy This Software: Why are the best programs always small, inexpensive utilities written by little guys? Point your browser at http://www.amfsoftware.com/windows/traynote.html and take a look at Traynote Plus 3.0. It sits unobtrusively in your Windows 95, 98 or NT system tray until you click on it; then it becomes a handy place to stick e-mail addresses, web page addresses, and phone/fax numbers, in addition to standard notes. When you return later, just double-click on the appropriate entry and your e-mail program or web browser loads with that address. It's shareware, costs only $15 to register, and is a real efficiency booster.

Be A Nutritional Research Scientist! Okay, a couple weeks ago the media reported that drinking tea was good for you and reduced the possibility of heart attacks. Last week, another group of eggheads announced that coffee was even better for you, even though they had made prior claims the beverage caused high blood pressure, sleeplessness and, quite probably, cooties. Instead of waiting breathlessly for the media to release the next nutritional non sequitur, get proactive! Use the official *KGB Random Nutritional Effects Generator*! Just steal a pair of dice from your Monopoly game, roll 'em three times (boxcars = 1), pick the items from the three columns listed below and viola! (sic), you're ready to issue your own press release! And if those silly media people question the validity of your claims, just act real prissy and challenge them to prove you wrong! Just like real a scientist!

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              KGB RANDOM NUTRITIONAL EFFECTS GENERATOR

     Substance/Activity            Effect                  Side Effect
 1 Chunky Peanut Butter   increases male potency, but causes crusty cold sores
 2 Decaffeinated coffee   improves vision, but         grows unsightly facial hair
 3 Spam                   increases breast size, but   causes baldness in females
 4 Cheez Whiz             improves night vision, but   promotes hair balls
 5 Watching tv news       cures insomnia, but          induces excessive drooling
 6 Taco Bell fast food    is a superb purgative, but   attracts small ugly dogs
 7 Olestra                lowers fat absorption, but   breeds explosive flatulence
 8 A placebo              does nothing, really, but    is not covered by your HMO
 9 A brisk daily walk     improves muscle tone, but    provokes psychotic episodes
10 Herbal tea             improves digestion, but      causes foreskin regeneration
11 A Hostess Twinkie      boosts overall energy, but   promotes antisocial behavior
12 Reading medical studies improves word skills, but   induces nymphomania
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Randomly Generated Quotes of the Week:

"Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, 'Why me?' then a voice answers 'Nothing personal, kid, your name just happened to come up.'"-Charlie Brown in *Peanuts*

"My Pager markup is already cryptographically secure, thank you."-Unknown

"I am one of the culprits who created the problem. I used to write those programs back in the '60s and '70s, and was so proud of the fact that I was able to squeeze a few elements of space by not having to put '19' before the year."-Alan Greenspan, Federal Reserve chair

"I never could figure out what to do in response to the message 'Outstanding Fatal Error'. Should I try to fix it, or just give it a standing ovation?"-Stephen O Gombosi

"If a jerk burns the flag, America is not threatened, democracy is not under siege, freedom is not at risk."-Rep. Gary Ackerman

"January 1 (2000) is a Saturday. So if the world comes to an end for a couple of days, it'll be OK. We've all had weekends like that."-Reed Hundt, former FCC chair

The *KGB Random Quotations Generator* has nearly 2,900 entries and is frequently updated. Visit it online at http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi. Many of the quotes are also available on our Curmudgeon Tees... check out http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html.

Trivia: Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K to its fans) aired its final episode on August 8. The show moved to the Sci-Fi Channel a few years ago following its first cancellation by Comedy Central. Through its ten-year run, the series skewered hundreds of bad movies and parodied scores of media-related issues. Its running-commentary style of humor was copied freely, most blatantly by MTV's Beavis and Butthead. My son and I became hooked on the show after watching their "Turkey Day Specials" on MTV Thanksgiving Day. I actually bought our DSS satellite system so we could watch the show on Comedy Central, since TCI cable didn't carry the network on our system. MST3K will be sorely missed, but fortunately my son has hundreds of the shows on tape. Some of the best episodes are also available from Rhino Video. This week's question: What is the real name of canola oil? The first person who responds correctly receives a KGB Consulting mouse pad.

Miscellany: Things that caught our attention this week... *Reassuring:* AT&T told TCI customers that while it will change the name, logos and billing procedures of its recently acquired cable company, the "services provided will remain the same." Thank goodness. I was afraid I'd have to look for another overpriced, unresponsive quasi-utility with abysmal service. *'Tis the season:* You can tell Labor Day is almost here; the Rite-Aid in beautiful downtown Library has started stocking Christmas lights on its shelves. It's a quaint local tradition, second only to the erection of the Valentine's Day candy displays right after Halloween. *Bad dog:* AVweb's AvFlash newsletter reported that an Irish wolfhound managed to free itself from a cage in the cargo area during a recent United flight and chewed up wiring in the cargo area, affecting cockpit warning systems and flap operation on the 767. United said the pilot was able to land the plane safely, and when luggage handlers opened the cargo door, they found Rover happily wagging his tail. Next time, let him ride coach.

Useless Web Sites of the Week: Don't visit http://www.grossology.org/grossology/ right after you've had dinner. A promotional site for the assorted "Grossology" books written by Sylvia Branzei, it's based on the assumption that since kids have a macabre interest in the various excreta and secretions produced by the human body, you might as well pander to it, teach them some biology and science and make a couple bucks in the process. My personal favorite: how to make fake snot with Elmer's glue, water, food coloring and borax solution. The site is just chock full of interesting facts. Did you know that some residents of the Sahara shove camel dung up their noses to cure head colds? That 70 out of every 100 people are nose pickers, and that three out of 70 eat what they find? At least that's the number that admits to it; Branzei suspects the actual number is far greater. "I sit outside under the stars and I think, `I write a book about boogers and farts and I'm sitting on a gold mine,' " Branzei says in an introspective note to her readers. "I thought it might have a small cult following, but I never thought this was what America wanted." Is this a great country, or what?

KGB In The News: Thanks to Stan Kelly-Bootle for the kind words in his Devil's Advocate column in the September issue of *Performance Computing*. Stan has been associated with computers for more than 40 years and earned the world's first postgraduate degree in computer science from Cambridge University. A superb and prolific writer, his latest book is *UNIX Complete* from Sybex Inc. His other works include *The Computer Contradictionary, Mastering Turbo C,* and *Understanding UNIX*, now available in Spanish, Chinese, Greek, and Korean. And I thought Greek was UNIX's native language.

Y2K-A-Rama

Still More Hysteria: Two weeks after the Gartner Group issued a warning that unscrupulous contract programmers hired to correct Y2K problems could have added secret "trap doors" into systems, and a week after Michael Vatis, director of the FBI's National Infrastructure Protection Center parroted the Gartner report to the media, the writer of the original study was hauled before the U.S. House

Subcommittee on Management Information and Technology. Seems some of the representatives were concerned that Gartner's prediction could frighten the general populace and questioned its accuracy. Report author Joseph Pucciarelli, obviously believing a good defense is a strong offense, said his prediction that there will be an electronic theft of $1 billion by 2004 was actually conservative. Pucciarelli said his report was reviewed by 300 of Gartner's clients, some of whom felt the risk was even higher. But then he backpedaled, noting that $1 billion isn't that bad, when you consider there's $11 trillion transferred electronically every year. That $1 billion then becomes 0.00909% of the total and, as Mr. Pucciarelli noted, "In this context, $1 billion seems somewhat less significant."

Shameless Self-Promotion: Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Items from *KGB Report* may be used in other media with proper attribution.

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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