

NATGUG News November 2004

Editorial

Well hear we are again at the Swindon Week-End, Yes if you have supported us you will be handed this months Natgug News and that will have saved us postage, which will have pleased our Tresurer, you will see the smile on his face!!!

I hope you will enjoy what we have lined up for you this week-end, I will be talking about DVD recording but I know I will learn something new from someone at the meeting, it never fails, every meeting I have been to (I have not missed a single meeting since the Swindon meeting began) I have gained some valuable information or knowledge about something.

All that leaves me to say is I truly hope you have a very enjoyable week-end.

Q&A - C.C. Delan

by C.C. Delan

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Q: In your August [#Sydtrug News# Editor's Note: 2003 January #Sydtrug News#] column you explained the ipconfig utility and its graphical version, winipcfg. It seems odd that Windows98 includes winipcfg, but Win2000 and XP have only the command line ipconfig. Is there a third-party utility that does the same thing ?#

A: It is not only odd that the Microshmoos omitted WINIPCFG, it makes one wonder if the monopoligarchists have gotten so huge that they can't keep track of their own utilities.

The fact is that an NT/2K/XP version is available as a free download from The Beast of Redmond's own website.

Named WNTIPCFG, it displays your TCP/IP settings and lets you release and renew DHCP leases. It doesn't offer quite as many options as the command line IPCONFIG, but its easier to use. I've no idea why it's not included on the Win2000 and XP CDs.

Get it free here:
www.microsoft.com/windows2000/techinfo/reskit/tools/existing/wntipcfg-o.asp.

Q: My job keeps me on the road at least one week every month. It is frustrating that so few hotels provide broadband access, not to mention that many still make even dialup access difficult. Is there a hotel guide that lists hotel Internet connection details ?#

A: Though the situation has greatly improved, at least at the more expensive hostelryes, when I travel I always carry a bag of tricks that includes screwdrivers, cables, alligator clips and a bunch of other stuff to get around the many primitive hotel phone traps. On occasion I've knocked a hole in the wall to get to the phone lines because the phone instrument was a moulded, hard wired piece.

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You can get a jump on the hoteliers by checking www.geektools.com/geektels before you make reservations. I don't know how reliable the list is, so when you find a likely prospect, call the hotel before booking.

Q: I sometimes forget to close my dialup connection when I'm on the Internet. Is there a way to set it so it shuts off after a certain period of inactivity? I really enjoy your column in the #Hard-Copy# magazine.#

A: Before our editor has a fit, let me hasten to note that #Hard-Copy# is a journal, not a magazine. (OK, I don't understand the difference either, but never mind. If nothing else it makes me into a #journalist#, rather than a mere scribbler. On the other hand, with public perceptions of journalists being what they are these days, maybe I'd be better off as a scribbler.

Count your blessings. Many users suffer from premature ejaculation of their connections and would be delighted to have your problem.

Find your dial-up connectoid, i.e. the icon that represents the dialler to your ISP. If you don't have a shortcut to it on your Desktop, you'll find it in Dial-Up Networking in My Computer.

- + Right-click it and select Properties.
- + On the General tab, near the bottom, you'll see "Connect using", followed by the name of your modem.
- + Click the "Configure" button under that.
- + On the connection tab click (i.e., put a checkmark in the box)

"Disconnect a call if idle for more than [xx] minutes".
+ Change the number of minutes to suit yourself.

Q: Need your advice on how to cure a problem I have with an Acer 320U scanner. At times when I try to access my scanner the computer tells me there is not a scanner connected to my computer. I have tried removing the program and then reinstalling it. Works fine, and then it will act up again. Tried going into the device manager, remove [sic] the scanner and then rebooting, works fine for a while.#

A: This is not an uncommon problem with scanners generally. Very often a few simple, but tedious, steps will track the gremlin down. Sometimes it's as easy as updating the driver. Unfortunately, there's no one method that works in all cases, but in almost all cases there is indeed a solution.

In the rare case where nothing works it is likely that either the scanner itself is defective, its power supply is defective, something in your Windows is badly corrupted, or there is an incompatibility between the scanner (or its driver) and something else in your system.

FWIW (for what it's worth) I have had just such a rare instance, where replacing the scanner power supply did the trick. But most cases are more straightforward.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, go to:
www.benq.com/support/faq_post_scanner_not_found.html, where you will find: 'General Troubleshooting

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Guide for "Scanner Not Found" Error Message'.

Take your time going through each of the steps until you find the one that works for you. Do this even if you've already done some of them before.

Patience is the key to success.

Q: Do you know if the message below is a hoax ? I doubt that it would work but I can't find it mentioned at the hoaxbusters web page. I didn't send it to anyone except you. Any info would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

"I learned a computer trick today that's really ingenious in its simplicity. As you may know, when/if a worm virus gets into your computer it heads straight for your e-mail address book, and sends itself to everyone in there, thus infecting all your friends and associates. This trick won't keep the virus from getting into your computer, but it will stop it from using your address book from spreading it further, and it will alert you to the fact that the worm has gotten into your system. Here's what you do: first, open your address book and click on "new contact" just as you would do if you were adding a new friend to your list of e-mail addresses. In the window where you would type your friend's first name, type in AAAAAAA. In the window below where it prompts you to enter the new e-mail address type in . Then complete everything by clicking add, enter, ok, etc.

Now, here's what you have done and why it works: The "name" AAAAAAA will be placed at the top of your address book as entry No. 1.

This will be where the worm will start in an effort to send itself to all your friends. But when it tries to send itself to AAAAAAA, it will be undeliverable because of the phony e-mail address you entered If the first attempt fails (which it will because of the phony address) the worm goes no further and your friends will not be infected. If your e-mail is alphabetical by addresses, then you can put AAAAAAA of [sic] the front of the worm alert address.

Here's the second great advantage of this method: If an e-mail cannot be delivered, you will be notified of this in your InBox almost immediately. Hence, if you ever get an e-mail spelling [sic] you that an e-mail addressed to [sic] you could not be delivered, you will know right away that you have the worm virus in your system.

You can then take steps to get rid of it! Pretty slick, huh ? If everybody you know does this then you needn't ever worry about opening mail from friends."#

A: Beware of e-mails bearing gifts. Or attachments. Or advice.

Your doubt is well founded. If not a hoax, it's at least a poorly-conceived solution that is really a dangerous non-solution. It's an old story, which has taken in a lot of people who should know better.

Look at it this way:

1. You put at the top of your address book. So if you get infected by a worm it tries to send itself to that address.

2. What if somebody actually owns the domain name "somewhere.com" ?

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The poor bastard will receive thousands of e-mails from all the folks who followed this advice. And you would be the guilty party. (In fact, somewhere.com #is# a registered domain name, owned by someone in Winchester, Massachusetts. But even if you change to a different name the principle is the same. Someone may eventually register whatever address is used.)

3. But let's assume that no-one #ever# registers that address. So the worm isn't delivered there. So what? What makes anyone think that worms #care# whether all of the addresses in your address book are valid? If the worm is doing a "send all" it will send itself to every address in your address book #except# somewhere.com (or whatever similar alternate you devised). (Whether it does or not depends on various factors in various e-mail programs. But this "trick" is generic, not for specific programs, right?)

4. Even if we stretch our belief to accept that this "trick" #would# work under the circumstances described, most modern worms select e-mail addresses randomly or by other means, not in alphabetical order.

5. Let's suppose that everything I've written above is wrong, and the trick really does prevent the worm from being e-mailed to anyone in your address book. So what? What makes anyone imagine that e-mailing itself is #all# that the worm does? Yes, some worms are just harmless annoyances. But some will be destroying your system even if they go no further.

6. The way to handle viruses, worms and trojans is to obtain, install and #regularly update# a good anti-virus program. Anything else is asking for trouble. I recommend updating AV programs every day (or no less than weekly).

7. There are several varieties of this nonsense. For details see: <http://antivirus.about.com/library/weekly/aa08280lb.htm> and www.snopes.com/computer/virus/quickfix/htm. Another good place to check for hoaxes is <http://vmyths.com>.

Practice safe computing. Avoid attachments generally, but if you open one use your AV app to scan it first. In my opinion, the use of attachments is way overdone. They should only be sent when there is no other way to achieve the objective. 99.9% of e-mail messages can (and IMO should) be sent as plain text.

No attachments. No HTML. No fancy crapola. Just communication.

Q: The people that make music and the companies that record, sell and distribute it are entitled to make a profit and earn a living, to be rewarded by the market for their production. Sharing music files is theft, plain and simple. I hope that you will set the record straight once and for all.

A: One could begin setting the record straight by straightening out the misperception that the thieving record companies are innocent businessmen living from hand-to-mouth while they combat a vast international conspiracy to steal the crusts of bread from their mouths.

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Here's an excerpt from a News.com report dated August 8, 2000:

"A coalition of 28 states filed suit against the major record labels today, alleging that they and several U.S. Retailers have illegally conspired to prop up the prices of compact discs.

"The states' attorneys general charge that the labels and retailers have violated state and federal antitrust laws since 1995, potentially costing consumers hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Our nation's business economy has been built on the notion of a fair and free competition,' New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, one of the lawsuit's leaders said in a statement today. 'Where there is illegal activity to fix prices -- as was the case here -- the consumer is always the loser."

"The suit, which is filed in the U.S. District Court in Manhattan, follows an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission into a similar accusation of CD price fixing. That issue was settled in May when the record labels agreed to drop their controversial pricing agreements with retailers. The record labels did not admit wrongdoing."

(The complete story is here: <http://news.com.com/2100-1023-244195.html>.)

A similar situation was recently uncovered in the UK. You can read about it here: <http://the-register.co.uk/content/7/27195.html>.

Q: I heard about a computer program that kills mosquitoes.

With the West Nile virus going around, I'd like to get that program, but can't find it. Can you help ?

A: The London Telegraph describes the program like this: 'The brainchild of a Thai company, Anti-Mal 2.0 can be downloaded free. About 130,000 have already taken advantage of it, 50,000 in the first three days of its availability. An upgraded program also sees off cockroaches by irritating their antennae.'

If you're ready to try your Thai, get it here: software/util/UL00724.htm.

If your high-school Thai language class has faded from memory, here's a place to download the app that is something akin to English, but ... it still links back to Thailand:http://specialoffers/features_mozzie.asp.

Of course, until the developers create a version for some sort of hand-held device, you'll have to carry a laptop with you while hiking through the woods.

Happy bug-hunting

Requiem for a Mouse

by E. M. Hazell

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It had served me faithfully, that little mouse, for at least a year. And in this time and place of throwaway societies one year is considered a long long time as far as faithful service, rendered by a mechanical device is concerned. That little mouse was of the bobtail variety. It was referred to as wireless and could travel quite a distance from that desktop village of mine. Of course sometimes the cats thought of making off with it, but I usually discouraged that. That little mouse died quietly. It just left that little cursor stranded in the middle of the monitor and nothing short of crashing the computer could persuade that cursor to move. When Faye called I was just about in the middle of a temper tantrum. I hate it when mechanical devices get the best of me.

"Did you say the mouse is wireless ?" Faye asked.

"Yes", I responded.

"Did you check the batteries ?"

Of course I hadn't. Bright and brilliant Mensa person that I am, whatever made me think that the wireless mouse and keyboard needed some source of energy, like maybe a few batteries. I thanked Faye for that helpful assist. Then I called the Guru just in case it could be something more serious. He agreed with Faye. He did, however, remain on standby just in case something else was wrong. I had promised Faye to have my column in and in order to do that, I had to have access to my village.

"How long have you had that wireless set", Clarence inquired. By now I was beginning to be sort of hesitant about giving out any more information about my latest debacle. When Clarence asks a question, a truthful answer seems to be well, shall we say mandatory ? Lies, even little white lies are not the stuff that good relationships and solid friendships are made of. I value Clarence as a friend as well as a computer guru.

"Since Christmas", I said.

"Since Christmas and you never once wondered where the energy for that mouse comes from ?"

He didn't say anything about that Mensa thing but I could read his mind even from a distance.

"Where did you buy it ?"

Actually I hadn't bought it, it had been a Christmas gift from my son; a totally unexpected Christmas gift. I hadn't been unhappy with my long tailed mouse. I set out the following morning to purchase batteries. The mouse wasn't the only critter at this establishment dining on batteries. Faye and Clarence had been correct about pointing out to me the importance of changing batteries. As it turned out, batteries could not resuscitate my bobtailed mouse. Something more serious was wrong in that entire wireless set up. "Where is that old keyboard and mouse ?" Clarence asked as he was about to attempt to get things straightened out again.

"I think I might have accidentally sort of given it away", I replied.

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That was a lie; accidentally was stretching the truth a little. And now it was time for another lesson. That lesson is clearly imprinted on my mind: ALWAYS KEEP A BACKUP HANDY.

I'm writing this column on Clarence's backup device. I still have another lesson to learn, like how to purchase the kind of device most suitable for my own personal computer needs. But in the meantime I'm having to compose a proper requiem for my fallen comrade. "Whoever heard of a requiem for a mouse, and a mouse as a sidekick is laughable". Nor was it thinkable that I should get by with anything here without Grandmama putting in her penny's worth of opinion. But this time I had her. "Walt Disney died a rich man because of a mouse in his desk drawer".

"I don't see you getting rich with your mouse!"

"That's a different mouse!"

"A mouse is a mouse is a mouse; a mouse is a varmint and the only good mouse is a dead mouse".

As far as Grandmama was concerned, that was an absolute. Mice usually ate into the profit as far as the farmer was concerned. I conceded. Grandmama would always be right. Still, there was that brave little mouse that responded to my every click.

"Last time it was that brave little Umax. Now it's that brave little mouse.

Maybe you starved it to death when you didn't provide those 'batteries'. Any plans for some demise next month?"

I took a moment before I responded. "I'm thinking of having my office exorcised to keep the spirit world away".

"Didn't I tell you I had myself immunised against exorcisms?" There seemed to be a gentle breeze and she was gone. I could have sworn it was a kiss on the cheek. I could never bar her from [my] own private little kingdom. Life would be so terribly dull with out her. Of course, there was still the matter of a requiem for my bobtailed mouse. A few bars of Beethoven entered my mind. And as I hummed along I thought; Why not. I'm certain Beethoven wouldn't mind.

"The ICON" On line
Newsletter, December 2002

Interactive Computer Owners
Network

Maizell's I/O: **Internet Security: Step by** **Step into the Fog**

by Jerry Maizell
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Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint --
Mark Twain

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Taking bad advice about computers is likely to have less serious consequences than bad advice about health, but both fields are full of quacks.

Computer quacks divide rather neatly into two categories: those who spread fear and confusion by exaggerating the dangers of the Internet and those who blithely assert that there is nothing to worry about.

The popular press offers both, often within the same pages of our daily newspapers. A so-called "news" article may warn of cyber-terrorists while a columnist in the same publication may boast that he doesn't bother with firewalls or antivirus programs because they're more trouble than they're worth.

If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's ... a computer writer

A typical example of the latter is in the Chicago Tribune's computer questions column of December 28. This is part of the author's reply to a reader who just got DSL service and wants to know how to protect his PC:

I'm pretty agnostic about this kind of stuff. I'm even cooler to the idea that everybody who gets a DSL or cable modem should shell out money for a firewall -- software that monitors all incoming and outgoing Internet traffic to warn of potential problems

"For my money one can avoid any attacks that a firewall might fend off simply by switching off the file sharing feature on their computers.

If you have a home network and turn off file sharing you may be protected ... from yourself.

The result for many users is confusion leading to paralysis. Since they don't know what to do they do nothing.

As I so elegantly put it in my previous column, Internet security is like eating Spaghetti-Os with chopsticks -- possible, but messy.

In that column I outlined some of the real dangers along with some of the ways I approached defending against them. But as I hinted that I wasn't satisfied with Norton Internet Security (NIS), some of you may be wondering what path I finally followed.

Having had occasional problems over the years with uninstalling Norton Programs, I waited until I plucked up my courage and set aside enough time to attack the project. Before starting I reviewed the uninstall instructions in Symantec's on-line knowledge base.

Symantec, obviously aware of the kinds of problems that lurk in uninstalling their stuff, provides detailed instructions in case things go awry, at least for uninstalling Norton AntiVirus (NAV, which is included in NIS). If you're interested see <http://service1.symantec.com/SUPPORT/nav.nfs/docid/2001061911223206>.

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In the event, Windows' Add/Remove Programs applet did away with NIS without fuss. Now I needed to start fresh with new security components.

After rebooting I installed the full version of NAV2002, which is valid for a year of updates, unlike the six-month version bundled free with NIS on my new Compaq.

I have a simple system for antivirus protection: I buy a new version of NAV every year. More accurately, I buy a new version of Norton SystemWorks every year, but I don't install SystemWorks.

The Cheap and (maybe) safe route to virus defence.

So, why buy the whole kit and kaboodle of System Works and not install it ? Because a careful shopper can get it for around \$20 or less, after discounts and rebates. That's five bucks cheaper than paying Symantec for another year's subscription to virus infection updates. (Sometimes you can get SW or NAV alone free after rebate and upgrade.)

And you get a bunch of other useful apps thrown in, like Ghost, GoBack (Personal Edition), Norton Utilities -- and, depending on the edition, some less useful ones (like CleanSweep; or CrashGuard, which is apparently not there anymore).

I've had so many problems with SystemWorks in the past that I don't trust it. So instead of clicking Install on the CD, I click Browse CD, find the NAV folder and double click the NAV Windows Installer Package (NAV.MSI)

Caution: as with any software installation, your mileage may vary. While you can depend on Windows to be annoying, any given system may react with different annoyances.

All I can do is explain what works for me and urge you to always be prepared for problems (by backing up important data) when installing software of any kind.

SystemWorks' readme file sounds a warning: "Individual products must be installed through the SystemWorks install only. If you attempt to launch the NAV.MSI file manually, you will get an error message stating that you don't have the proper administrative privileges."

I have never gotten such a message and haven't encountered problems. But you have been warned. Symantec wants you to follow its regular Install program, unchecking the applications that you don't want. I have reports from some users that it works for them. You pays your money and you takes your chances. Either way, back up your data first.

One down, three to go: Step two -- Cookies and Referrers.

Installing Norton AntiVirus, however, was just the first step. In my vision of security for home computer users there are four components:

- + virus defense
- + referrer and cookie defence
- + software firewall
- + hardware firewall

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Most browsers now include decent protection against unwanted cookies, as well as a means of managing useful cookies. Some sites require cookies and almost all on-line shopping carts do.

One system I've used is to set my main browser to #block# all cookies (with a few exceptions). Then when I need to visit a site requiring cookies I launch Internet Explorer, which I set to #accept# all cookies. It's klunky, but it works, more or less.

It would be better to have a complete cookie management system, one that also handles referrers.

One of the things I liked about NIS was its blocking of referrers. Referrers tell websites about the previous site(s) you visited, and perhaps some other things, none of which information I want strangers to have.

Get a cookie-eating, referrer-rejecting cop -- for free.

So when I made the decision to to uninstall NIS I needed to find another application to handle that function. Reaching back into research I did a few years ago I found CookieCop, a free utility from PC Magazine. It worked well enough then, but not as well as my favourite of the time, AtGuard (which is now incorporated into NIS).

Downloading and installing the new version of CookieCop took but a few minutes. (Get it at www.pcmag.com, click Downloads, then search or find it alphabetically.)

To my delight, CookieCop's latest incarnation does everything one could want. It keeps track of what it does and can be set up to suit almost anyone's preferences.

In my current two-hour Internet session its statistics tab shows that it has rejected 243 cookies and removed 270 referrers.

Mark Sweeney, at the download site, does a great job of explaining how and why CookieCop does its magic, so I won't go into it other than to note that it uses a proxy system, so this is one case where you must follow the setup instructions.

While its default setup will work well, it's worth paying attention to the details after initial setup.

That is especially important if you use more than one browser. I use four: Mozilla, Opera, Netscape and Internet Explorer. I did not set CookieCop to work with IE, as I consider IE an auxiliary tool, which I use when I must give in to the whims of the unreconstructed Microserfs.

That is a personal choice, not a "rule". There ain't no rules for computers -- at least, none that count for much. What works, works. The trick is in finding what works best for you.

Step three -- software firewall: ZoneAlarm.

Though ZoneLabs makes a good pitch for the \$39-95 Pro version, ZoneAlarm is still free for personal use.

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So even if you follow the Trib guy, you won't have to "shell out money for a firewall". (Download it at www.zonelabs.com. You'll have to poke around the site a bit to find the free one.)

It is easier to use than ever -- at least for new users. I'm used to the old one and I'm still not comfortable with ZA 3's look and feel. But then I don't like wearing new shoes either.

There is a kernel of truth in the Trib guy's assertion that one can be safe from incoming attacks without deploying a firewall. But there is more to the story and more kinds of threats and/or annoyances than are dreamt of in that simplistic philosophy.

Among the problems that a software firewall can handle is software already installed on your computer that wants to reach out to the Internet for reasons other than normal browsing or e-mail.

Not all of this "phone home" software is what one would typically categorise as "spyware". As noted in my previous column, NIS found 75 Internet-enabled programs on my system, of which 53 were from Microsoft.

Some of the 75 are legitimate, like NortonAntiVirus, which contacts the Internet to update virus definitions. Others are ... suspect, to say the least. I like to be able to control what they're doing, when and why.

Except for the "why", ZA lets you approve/disapprove their actions.

I usually disallow them the first time they request Net access, then watch to see if there are any unhappy results. If so, I'll allow them the next time.

Once it's clear that an application is entitled/not entitled to Internet access you can check a box to have ZA remember your decision and let it proceed uninterrupted in future or be automatically blocked.

It is not difficult to set ZA up or to use it, though it can be confusing for a first time user. But it includes a step-by-step tutorial that shows and tells you what ZA does and the basics of managing it.

Step four: rooting for routers, whether you need one or not

Routers are now so easy to plug in to your system that there's no longer any reason not to have one, whether you need it or not.

The point of a router in a home computer setup is to link two or more computers in a local area network (LAN) and share a broadband Internet connection (DSL or cable) among the PCs.

But even if you only have one PC and a broadband connection, a router can serve as an effective hardware firewall, making your system invisible to outsiders.

And routers, which not long ago were sold for hundreds of dollars, can be had by careful shoppers for as little as \$20-\$30 after rebate.

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The most commonly discounted brands are D-Link, Siemens and Belkin, though LinkSys and Netgear are often available cheaply. All of them have good reputations.

My first router was a \$500 SpeedStream, my second a LinkSys for \$130 (it now goes for around \$50) and my third (waiting to be installed) is a D-Link -- \$29-99.

This isn't the place to discuss wireless routers, but if you go the wireless route note that many wireless devices come with encryption turned off by default. Make it a priority to turn WEP (wireless encryption protocol) on during setup. Otherwise your network is broadcasting to the neighbourhood. There's more to it than that, though, so don't go naked into that wireless night.

Now ... ignore all the above ?

Having led you down the garden path into the fog that is Internet security, you may be rolling your eyes and wondering why, if the Internet requires so many defenses, you shouldn't go back to snail mail and the boob tube and leave the Internet to the geeks and freaks.

Don't be intimidated. I have good news for you. There is a simpler way. A one shot solution.

Not so comprehensive, but it will leave you far better off than following the advice of the popular press Pollyannas who tell you there is nothing to worry about.

Norton Internet Security is an excellent program, but from my viewpoint it suffered from two problems: it was relatively expensive and it didn't include a way for temporarily and easily blocking all Internet access.

That is, it didn't have a temporary Internet stopper in the 2002 version I was using. For its 2003 release Symantec has copied that feature from ZoneAlarm. NIS now has a "Block Traffic" button.

Invoke it before touching any HTML e-mail and you will at least protect yourself from the home-phonning bugs planted in so much spam.

As of this writing Symantec is offering a \$30 rebate, bringing the price into the under-\$50 range.

If even installing NIS is too much trouble for you maybe you'll be doing the rest of us a favour by drawing all the hackers and crackers to your system so the rest of us can relax.

Keep Your Hard Drive Driving

by Chris Doyle - Ontrack

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Here's a quick quiz: What takes a licking yet keeps on ticking ? Right -- your hard drive. The truth is that hard disks manufactured in the last few years last longer than that old clunker you're using as a doorstop.

Here's the surprise. You can squeeze a longer life -- maybe even keep a faulty drive trucking -- with a few easy tips.

The silent killer of hard drives is heat -- especially high-speed SCSI drives. My recommendation ? Use a hard drive cooling fan with all hard drives. You can buy them direct at <http://www.3dfxcool.com> or at FRY's. I have cooling fans for both my IDE and SCSI drives. In the lab, we have cooling fans on the drives at all times.

Optimise your hard drive on a daily basis. As much as this may be a pain for some, optimising your drive has several benefits. Besides optimising the files, this process also catches many minor problems that may manifest themselves into a major problem later.

Examples ? Cross linked or orphan files. Another good reason is that if you do have a problem accessing data on your drive, when a utility is run, such as Norton, nuts and bolts, or tiramisu, the chances of recovery are much higher if the drive has been optimised recently. (By the way -- Mijenix (<http://www.mijenix.com>) makes a great utility to perform this function. <<Smile>>)

Without question, you must run SpinRite on all of your drives once a quarter -- at number five, the highest.

This is a personal recommendation. Steve Gibson's utility is excellent, and will find many if not all surface defects before they manifest themselves further. Trouble in Paradise, also known as TIP, is an excellent tool for Zip disks.

Should I mention backing up your data on a regular basis ? Do it often, early, and often and early.

Examining your power supply is critical. It's not too difficult to tax a power supply in some systems if they are fully loaded. If possible, I recommend you make sure that the systems have a decent power supply -- at least 250 watts or more. (PC Power and Cooling makes the best). Also make sure that your hard drives have their own independent power connection, not shared by other devices. An uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) is another good idea (and don't sweat, these things are much more reasonably priced than in the past).

Many people ask whether it's best to keep your computer running all the time -- or better to turn it off and on. My recommendation is turn your computer on in the morning and off at night. I also think that disabling all power saving devices is best for hard drives. Forcing a hard drive on a desktop PC to spin down every 15 min of inactivity -- and then waiting a minute or two to spin up -- is worse than turning the computer off and on.

Never, ever move the computer while it is up and running. (Try telling that to laptop users!)

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Any blow to the computer -- it tips over, is dropped an inch or more -- and that bump gets transmitted directly to the hard drive. Most of the time it will cause a minor head crash. Worst case ? It will cause bad things to happen. No, don't ask. But you'll be calling Ontrack to get an estimate. <<smile>>

Don't forget about static when handling drives. The newest and highest performing drives come with (hushed tones, please) Giant MR Heads. They're extremely sensitive to static. Ontrack has redone all of our static procedures to handle this technology, and I can tell you from first hand experience that static will kill drives dead.

Drives that make clicking, thumping, or grinding noise are experiencing a mechanical problem of some sort. No surprise, huh ? But each time the drive is powered up, the more that damage is occurring on the drive. If data recovery is needed in this case, please, please, please -- the less you do to the drive, (powering up or using utilities) the more data we can recover. And the faster we can recover it.

If you think you have a problem with a drive, try going to the manufacturer's Web site. Download the specific utility they make to check the drive. Since the utility comes from the manufacturer, they know how to check specific issues with their drives.

Here are some examples:

Quantum: QDPS

IBM: DFT

Western Digital: WD Diag

Maxtor: MaxDiag (I think)

Ontrack's Data Advisor: This tool will work with all drives. And it's probably the safest tool to use to check a drive.

Here's a tip for tinkers, users that do a lot of testing of drives. In many cases, it's very difficult to get rid of a hard drive after installing a particular operating system or file system type. That's especially true when using programs such as System Commander.

Try booting up with Ontrack's Disk Manager. The utility has a feature that will write zeros to every sector of the drive. This puts the drive back into the shape it was when it came from the factory. After the process is done, it's easy to partition and format the drive. Don't forget, though, that this will destroy all information on the drive.

Here's one for all of you SCSI users lurking out there (including me). Keep your drivers current. Driver and BIOS updates for your SCSI card can make a world of difference in how your drive performs. Don't forget to make sure you follow the specifications for cabling and termination.

Okay, now that you have some new tools for preserving your hard drive, I have some bad news. I saw a 40GB drive advertised at FRYs for \$29.99 (after rebate). <<just kidding>>

OnTrack's Chris Doyle loves to hear hard drives happily humming. You can reach him at CDoyle@ontrack.com

Outrageous Help Desk Stories

by Uncredited

[This article has been reprinted from the 2003 June issue of "SYDTRUG News", newsletter of SYDTRUG Inc., PO Box 75, PANANIA NSW 2213, AUSTRALIA, where it was brought to you by the Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organisation to which SYDTRUG Inc. belongs. There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context, with proper credit given to the author.]

From the Help Desk of a company that would rather stay anonymous

Printer problems: My favourite story comes from my past when working in a tech support organisation for a computer company. At the time of this story, the company had released some buggy spooler software in their product, which was a database product.

We were quite used to frantic customers calling after trying to run an end-of-month job to complain that nothing is coming out of the printer. The typical fix was to dial-in to their computer, go into a debugger and through a laborious process unclog the confused spooler software so the job would print. We would then admonish the customer to install the latest patches.

In this particular instance, the customer called at the end of the day, frantic and upset. A couple of us sat around a terminal and modem and dialed into the system.

After pawing through the entrails of the machine for a while, the tech next to me talked to the customer on the speakerphone.

tech: "would you mind going over to the printer ?"

customer: "OK, I'm there."

tech: "Do you see a white, square button labelled, 'On Line' ?"

customer: "Yes, I see it."

tech: "Is it illuminated ?"

customer: "No."

tech: "Please press it once."

customer: "OK, I did that...Wow! The most amazing thing just happened: the report is spewing out of the printer. Good job! Thanks a lot!"

And this, of course, is why most companies don't use local support. They know it is impossible to kill someone over the telephone.

Upside Down Envelopes: A long-time user complained that the network printer had begun printing envelopes upside-down. I told her the printer could not be printing them upside down, but the envelopes had to have been inserted backward. She insisted that she had been putting envelopes into that printer in exactly the same way for over a year and she knew it had always worked that way before. My solution was to open the printer, take out the toner cartridge, shake it up a bit, turn the envelopes around, reinsert the cartridge, and have her try again.

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Voila! "See", she said, "I KNEW I had loaded the envelopes right! It really was something wrong with the printer!"

It's Magic! This incident occurred at a previous employer. It was not an outrageous complaint, but was more an example of how incompetent users can be. A user came to me complaining that she could not get any of her documents to print. I went through the normal checks to make sure everything was functioning properly, which it was. I then determined that she had not logged on properly to the Novell network so her documents were not getting to the networked printer.

Without her knowledge, I got her logged on, but before I printed anything, I thought I would have some fun with her. I asked her if she was familiar with the terms bits and bytes, and she said she was. I told her that her computer sends bytes of information through the network to the printer to be printed.

But for some reason, there were a large number of bytes clogging the line to the printer. We then went over to the printer where I unplugged the network connection. I told her we had to let the bytes "escape" out of the line so it would be clear to print again. I plugged it back in, went to her machine and printed a document. She was amazed!

After that, whenever she had a problem, she asked me to come "Clean the lines again".

Black and White in Colour: Received a call from a new user wanting to know why her documents were not printing in colour.

I told her that the printer is a black and white laser printer.

She said, "Well the program said what you see is what you get". I told her again that the printer only prints in black and white. She continued to blame the software and her computer and wanted someone to come take a look at it.

Click the Power Switch: I had a guy who was sitting in the building with all the power off calling me and screaming that he could not print his Excel spreadsheet.

Article reproduction coordinated by Steve Bass, Pasadena IBM Users Group.

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