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Down Time--Nightmare at the Library

Terry Ballard

Gill Library, College of New Rochelle, tballard@cnr.edu

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Down Time—Nightmare at the Library

Diligent backups are critical, but they need the online catalog to work

It started slowly, like a bad dream, and then became a full-fledged nightmare. One Sunday afternoon, my assistant called me at home and told me that our online catalog was starting to do some funny things. He called the company in California for technical support, and they were doing some fixes that should get things working again. Later on, just to be sure, I called California to speak with the technician myself. "It looks like your CPU may be starting to go. Make sure to follow up on this with the regular technicians on Monday."

On Monday, things started to unravel. Files disappeared. The system lost circulation data. It was impossible for the people in acquisitions to print purchase orders. We called about each of these problems all morning. The people in California treated each of the symptoms. However, every time they fixed something, two more things went wrong.

It was afternoon before the technicians

and kept daily and weekly backup tapes—and we knew that there was a reason for that. "Every piece of equipment has a creation date and a death date," a technician had once told me. "They will all fail someday, so you'd better be ready for it."

In one sense, at least, we were ready for it. Because my assistants are absolutely scrupulous about keeping daily and weekly backups, we had all of the tapes for the last two weeks in a fireproof container. We had everything . . . except a working machine.

Damage Control

I sent messages to the entire faculty and staff of the law school. I told them that the system was down, but we were completely on top of the problem and we were certain it would be back up early Thursday. We put signs on the terminals saying mostly the same thing, but leaving out an estimate for service resumption. Students were starting to ask people at the

St. Helens. Within a half hour, I got word that another disk drive had been found and it was being overnighted for Thursday arrival.

I got to work on Thursday smiling. By 11 o'clock, we had swapped out the disk drives. What I wasn't told was that this drive was in an unconfigured state, so it would take all day to get the system up.

Meanwhile, we started working on ways to provide something—anything—to our patrons at the former OPAC machines. What we provided was a telnet link to Columbia, the law school closest to us in terms of content. We reasoned that they would have a lot of the same recent books we owned, and the call numbers would be the same. We put up new signs explaining the situation. The students and faculty, while not thrilled, gave us points for trying.

I worked late that evening so that I would be around when the system came back up. The telephone rang. "Hi, Terry. Just letting you know that we're acting right away to cover the problem with the new disk drive."

"Problem?" I said. "This is the first I heard about a problem."

"Oh, yes. The disk drive we sent you failed. These things happen. We'll get you out new equipment as soon as we can, but it's pretty late in the day."

Once again, I took a long train ride home. This time, my life flashed repeatedly before my eyes, complete with new scenes like the colleague who informed me, "Nothing like this ever happened before you got here." Once again, I appealed my case to a higher court. This time, I had a large list of demands. "I want a complete set of equipment—CPU and disk drives—sent via special courier, and I want a technician to go with them." Something was very wrong here, and a real human being should take a look.

I got all of the equipment that I asked for, and the promise that they would send an East Coast representative if this solution didn't work. On Friday morning, I sent an assistant via cab to JFK airport to meet the package. We set up the CPU with the original disk drive to see if it was a CPU problem all along. The machine did not light up the way it should. We took it apart and found that there was a loose piece of metal rattling around inside. We took that out, and it started right up.

By Friday afternoon, everything was running just fine. I sat in my office with my assistants, and we compared our adventure to *Apollo 13*. That afternoon, there was a going away party—complete with wine—for one of our staff members. I was able to relax for the first time in a week.

The Aftermath

I always try to take something positive from the jaws of the worst disasters, and this was no exception. Mark Twain's

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”

started considering that this was something more than a lot of isolated cases of flaky behavior. They looked at the disk drives and tried different kinds of fixes. By the time I caught the train home, the system was still up, but doing poorly.

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"It's too late in the day to configure a disk drive," they said. "We'll overnight you one tomorrow and you'll be back in business Thursday."

No More Maytag Repairman

Down time is not good for any library, but a law school library is the nerve center of the whole operation. It actually affects the school's ability to do its job. But at least we knew what to expect, bad as it was. One full day and then business as usual.

A full day of unexpected down time is something that I had never lived through. Years ago, I had given a speech saying that I felt like the Maytag repairman. On the other hand, we exercised due caution

reference desk, "Can't you do anything?" I could hear OPAC-basher Nicholson Baker laughing and saying "See, I told you so." [Baker, a nonlibrarian author, bemoaned the loss of card catalogs in his article "Annals of Scholarship: Discards," which appeared in the April 4, 1994 issue of *New Yorker* (Vol. 70 No. 7, pages 64-86).]

I was on the phone with the company on Wednesday. They were configuring a new hard drive that would be packed that afternoon in plenty of time for the overnight services. Otherwise, we just couldn't do anything. While we had backup tapes, they were backup tapes that would only work with the online catalog.

Just before I left Wednesday night, I got a call from the company. The disk drive that they were configuring failed. We'd have to wait another day. Everything would be fine on Friday. I hung up in a state of shock.

As I took the train home to Long Island, the seething process began. By the time I got home, I was back on the phone with the company—this time to upper management. Three days' worth of frustration spilled out like the eruption of Mt.

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advice "Put all your eggs in one basket—and watch that basket," from *Puddnhead Wilson*, could not be followed. We had to have an alternate plan. I told a colleague that we needed to determine which of the 150,000 records in our system were the most important, then make a backup file that we could store in word processing. "That will be very difficult," he told me.

Yes, it was difficult, but when we had our meeting, we were able to make the determination in about 10 minutes. I made lists of books added to the system in the last five years, the complete serials list, and the complete reserve reading room holdings. I made ASCII copies of the lists, which were mounted on the law school LAN and on individual hard drives. Now we are covered for anything short of a power failure.

Coincidentally, just a short time later we had a planned power outage. I shut the OPAC down in the evening and came back the next day after the outage. The machine would not boot. I called the vendor and got the same technician who had worked with us during the great disaster. This time it was something simple and we had things up within a half hour. However, that night I looked in the mirror and noticed a number of new gray hairs.

Terry Ballard is automation coordinator at the New York University School of Law Library. He can be reached by e-mail at ballardt@turing.law.nyu.edu.