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Librarians Can Party Like It's 1999

Terry Ballard

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

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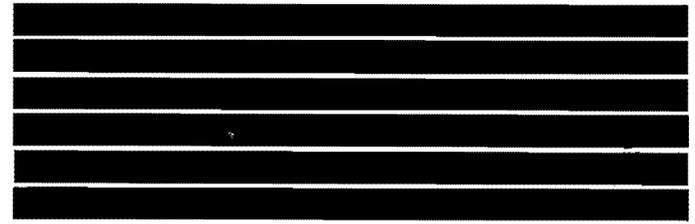
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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Librarians Can Party Like It's 1999

Or despair when the computer system can't cope with the year 2000

Exactly 1,000 years ago, end-of-the-world fever was sweeping Europe as the year 1000 approached. After the shock of still existing in a world with a 4-digit date abated, humanity got back to its main business of creating food, shelter, wars, and excuses.

As the second millennium approaches, there is a new problem on the horizon that, while not as apocalyptic, can generate sleepless nights for those of us in library systems. The problem goes under many names—the most popular are the “2000 problem,” the “Millennium Bug,” and the “Millennium Problem”—and its roots go back to the 1960s when computer technicians were inventing computer programs such as COBOL to run the large mainframe computers. Computer memory was expensive, and so they cut some corners by programming the computers to only work with two digits for the date. Anyone who lived through the 1960s can understand this attitude. At the time it didn't seem possible that the world—much less the programs—could exist until the end of the century.

Now that we are here, we are left to clean up the mess. However, don't think your library is out of the woods if it is not running systems on a mainframe. The problem exists in varying degrees all over the automation spectrum. For instance, I performed an experiment on the 486 in my kitchen that I am using to produce this column. I went into DOS and tried to reset the date to January 1, 2000. “INVALID DATE” was the reply. It would take the date of December 31, 1999. I then set the

time to 11:59, and as I ticked off the seconds to the new year I wondered what would happen. Would the motherboard melt down because it couldn't live the lie of existing in an invalid date? At the stroke of midnight, my computer dealt with this by skipping back 24 hours to relive December 31. When I looked a few days later, I saw that the computer had moved further back in time to the beginning of 1980. I am told that machines running Windows 95 are immune to this problem, but if you have any machines still running DOS in two years, you'd better start making some inquiries.

Vendors Address the Issue

To get a sense of how bad the problem might be for us, I checked with some of the more important people in library technology. According to Bruce Washburn, access services officer at Research Libraries Group, “An overall review of RLG's systems is being conducted. At this stage of our review, RLG systems have been found to be capable of handling the year 2000-plus in most cases, and the rest will be added shortly. We will be publicizing more information on this later on at a special location on our Web page (<http://www.rlg.org/year2k.html>).”

Perhaps because OCLC was invented in the 1960s, I got a different kind of answer from Rick Noble, OCLC's vice president of marketing and reference services. “Some of our internal software is not millennium-compatible,” he told me. “There is a major task force at work within the organization, and we are working

with a consultant that specializes in the problem. Our reference services such as FirstSearch are in good shape.” This is likely because they came along within the last six years.

“OCLC will be completely compliant by 1998,” Noble added. “We are starting to get letters from libraries to confirm that we will be ready for the changeover. In addition, we are working to get similar assurances from the various data suppliers who are partnering with us in our reference services.”

We Don't Have Long to Wait

When I started working on this issue, I found out that we will not have to wait until the year 2000 to find out the effect of the millennium on our systems. A newspaper story reported that a video store on Long Island had a computer system that was rejecting people because their drivers licenses expire sometime in 2000. So in the area of patron expiration dates alone, we can all expect to know the effect of the new dates during this year or the next. Academic libraries who check books out to their faculty for a year will know the score early in 1999. No doubt there is a library out there that will have to deal with a patron who gets billed \$3,000 for a Stephen King book that is a century overdue. A little advance planning can help ensure that your library won't be the one.

In the area of OPACs, the news seems to be good. Steve Silberstein of Innovative Interfaces says that all of their INNOPAC machines run on a UNIX platform, and they are totally millennium-compliant.

This is in spite of surface features such as limiting a search by date and getting a prompt that supplies the “19.” “Searchers can always use the backspace key and supply any century. This could be changed by us at any time, although it will probably be a feature of some new release of the software. In the matter of displaying due dates, even though the system only displays the last two digits, it is tracking them as four-digit dates.” (I verified this in our system by extending the time period for a professor's materials due to expire on December 31, 1999.) Since the major OPACs mostly run on UNIX, most systems librarians should be out of the running for dealing with the \$3,000 fine and the angry patron.

Web-Based Resources

As with any major event, there is a Web page dealing with the 2000 problem—the Year 2000 Information Center (<http://www.year2000.com>). This is an electronic clearinghouse for articles on the subject and, of course, links to other sites.

Even if you have covered every angle of the year 2000 problem, don't think that the information superhighway will be free of potholes. Steve Silberstein pointed out that there is another problem that could be just as bad. “A method to increase the number of IP addresses needs to be found soon or there could be serious problems with the ability of the Internet to expand enough to take care of projected use over the next few years.” [See a related news announcement on p. 53.]

I look at it this way—if there weren't problems, we wouldn't need systems librarians.

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.

Internet Waves

(continued from previous page)

- web.cmp.com/ng/online_insider): Covers commercial online services
- TidBITS (<http://www.tidbits.com>): Especially good for things *Macintosh*
- Weekend Web Picks (<http://www.netogether.com/picks.html>): Reviews three top URLs in a different category every week
- The Weekly Bookmark (<http://www.weeklyb.com>): Net news and site reviews
- Yahoo's Picks of the Week (<http://www.yahoo.com/picks>): Sites selected by Yahoo staff; lighter fare

Okay. Suppose you don't want to wait for news of what's new on the Net to come to you. Well, there are a whole bunch of "What's New" pages out there that you can check periodically. Most of the major indexes and search engines offer something like this. Heck, you can even click right on Netscape's *What's New* button. If you'd like to visit a whole slew of these pages in one surfing session, take advantage of the Meta-List of What's New Pages (<http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~mengwong/whatsnew.list.html>). Last time I checked (in late January), there were about 35 "What's New" sites listed here.

Current Awareness Services

Meanwhile, there are a number of variations on the current-awareness-by-e-mail theme. Keeping up with Usenet newsgroups, for example, is almost impossible these days due both to the number of groups as well as the sheer volume of messages posted to them—too much of which is irrelevant garbage. And yet, for

the latest gossip, Usenet is the place to go.

Say you work for a company that has released a new software product, and you want to see what "the masses" are saying about it. You could spend an inordinate amount of time trolling the appropriate newsgroups, of course. But there's a better way.

Several free services allow you to register topics in which you are interested. Then—daily, weekly, or whatever, depending on your preference—these "agents" make a sweep of Usenet newsgroup postings and cull out anything mentioning your subject of interest. The results are either e-mailed to you or you receive a notice that the agent has "found something" and you can surf directly to the service's Web site to peruse the new information. Interested? Try these:

- Reference.com (<http://www.reference.com>): Set up "Active Queries" that let you store topic searches on Reference.com's computer, and have them run automatically each day for some number of days. Register with your e-mail address and choose a password.
- At1—Your Gateway to the Invisible Web (<http://www.at1.com>): There's a lot of nifty stuff here, including the ability to run free searches of proprietary databases (although you'll pay to receive full-text results). Set up "agents" to scan Usenet newsgroup postings by using natural language queries. Or register URLs you wish to track with "URLy Warnings," and receive e-mail notification whenever something on that Web page changes. (Another site that provides this service is NetMind's URL-Minder at <http://www.netmind.com/URL-minder/URL-minder.html>.)

Serious Stuff

Municipal.com (<http://www.municipal.com>), a new service from R.R. Donnelley Financial Services, "is a centralized Internet resource that provides comprehensive municipal data for and about the municipal securities industry and its participants." This is a searchable database of Official Statements, Material Events, and Annual Financials—mandated under SEC rule 15c2-12—provided by more than 50,000 municipal issuers. As of late January, the database contained 50,000 documents. Register for a 30-day free trial and, if it meets your needs, you can become a paying subscriber.

Medical World Search (<http://pride.sun.poly.edu>) is a unique Web search engine for the health sciences. Using an index of the major medical sites on the Web, it can search these sites in full text with speed and sophistication. Medical World Search uses a thesaurus of 540,000 medical terms to expand or narrow searches automatically for optimal results and can provide information about each medical term. It can also send your query to other search engines—including HealthGate's free MEDLINE search (<http://www.healthgate.com>)—after refining it through its thesaurus. If you register (free), Medical World Search can then recall your last 10 queries, as well as the last 10 pages you visited from its site.

Press of the World (<http://www.pressoftheworld.com>) offers a free database of pretty much every online newspaper in the world. You can search by city, country, state, or specific newspaper. A directory of newspaper business editors and business magazine news editors—maintained by EditPros, a marketing communications company in Davis, California—is avail-

able at <http://www.editpros.com/media.html>. It contains links to more than 150 major U.S. newspapers and more than 120 national and regional business magazines and trade journals.

GRA Research Hotlinks (<http://www.grai.com/links.html>) is a collection of 65 links to other Web sites for doing research in the field of international business and economics, including political risk and international affairs. Each link is accompanied by a brief description of what you can find there.

Jenny's GPS Links (<http://www.ghgcorp.com/wagenx/gps.htm>) is a collection of links related to Global Positioning Systems compiled by an aerospace engineer at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

Not-So-Serious Stuff

- Dale's "Why should someone go out with me?" page (<http://www.ualr.edu/~domiller/dating/newreasons.html>)
- Peeping Tom Homepage (<http://www.csd.uu.se/~s96fst>)
- Death by Misadventure: Real Dumb Ways to Die (<http://ourworld.com/puserve.com/homepages/misadventure>)
- The Butt Page (<http://www.well.com/user/cynsa/newbutt.html>)
- The Trash Cans of Disney (<http://www.swt.edu/~CS22517>)

Shirley Kennedy is the information goddess at Honeywell's aerospace facility in Clearwater, Florida. In her spare time, she is writing a book for the American Library Association about effective research on the Internet. She lives on the bitstream at skennedy@pobox.com.

Seven New Top-Level Domain Names for Internet Addresses to Be Provided

Under a plan recently announced by the Internet Society's International Ad Hoc Committee (IAHC), a coalition of participants from the broad Internet community, working to satisfy the requirement for enhancements to the Internet's global Domain Name System (DNS), the number of names available to specify Internet locations, such as Web sites and e-mail addresses, will increase and more firms will be allowed to act as registrars for the names. The plan is a result of efforts by the 11-member IAHC, an international group named to resolve questions critical to the current and future growth of the Internet, which is chaired by Donald M. Heath, president and CEO of the Internet Society. Before formulating its plan, the IAHC received input from individuals, organizations, and government agencies from around the world.

When the plan is implemented, Internet users will have seven new generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs) in addition to the existing ones (.com, .net, and

.org) under which they may register Internet names:

- .firm—for businesses or firms
- .store—for businesses offering goods to purchase
- .web—for entities emphasizing activities related to the Web
- .arts—for entities emphasizing cultural and entertainment activities
- .rec—for entities emphasizing recreation/entertainment activities
- .info—for entities providing information services
- .nom—for those wishing individual or personal nomenclature

Another part of the plan allows for up to 28 new registrars to be established to grant registrations for second-level domain names under the new gTLDs. For example, in <http://www.infotoday.com>, the TLD is ".com" and the second-level name is "infotoday." The new registrars will be selected by lottery from applicants who fulfill specific requirements established by the IAHC. All the new gTLDs

will be shared among the new registrars, meaning that each registrar may effect registration of second-level domain names under all the new gTLDs. It is intended that the three existing gTLDs (.com, .net, and .org) would also be shared upon conclusion of the cooperative agreement between Network Solutions, Inc. (NSI) and the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), which allows NSI to act as the registrar for those gTLDs and remains in force until 1998.

To guide future registrar developments, an association of all the registrars, to be called the Council of Registrars (CORE) and established under Swiss law, will create and enforce requirements for registrar operations. These requirements are spelled out in a separate legal instrument to which each registrar must agree. The IAHC plan includes the establishment of a nonregulatory policy framework in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which both the public and private sector will be invited to

sign. The MoU will provide a mechanism for signatories to advise on future policy evolution of the global Internet domain name system.

An earlier draft proposal by the IAHC had recommended a mandatory 60-day waiting period before activation of new domain names, in order to alleviate what is considered to be a major source of instability in the DNS, namely widespread piracy of famous trademarks by certain domain name holders. In the final report, that recommendation has been replaced by a more comprehensive solution that addresses the needs of all classes of stakeholders. In addition to making the 60-day waiting period optional for registrants, the final report institutes a system for dispute settlement involving online mediation, mandatory arbitration (if a domain name challenger chooses to initiate arbitration), and a fast-track online administrative domain name challenge procedure.

The full text of the IAHC report is published on the Internet at <http://www.iahc.org>.

Source: Internet Society, Reston, VA, 703/648-9888; Fax: 703/648-9887; <http://www.isoc.org>.