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Next Meeting
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Libre Office
with Arpad Kovacs

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New Type of Search Engine Provides More Information with "Mind Mapping"

by Ira Wilsker

We are all aware of several of the major search engines including Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. These search engines, along with most of their other competitors, use a linear type of search results. With these search engines, the user simply types a search term, which promptly displays a linear listing of results, with little indication of how those results displayed are connected to each other. Many of the displayed results on these traditional search engines are not necessarily the "best" results for the user's inquiry, as there are a variety of "SEO" or "Search Engine Optimization" tools and utilities designed to influence the search engines to manipulate the displayed results. The websites that used "SEO" appear higher up on the list than those that did not, an important and valuable consideration because most

users do not scroll past the first few results that are displayed. Since the search engine results are manipulated, those websites displayed towards the top of the listings may not necessarily be the most relevant for the intended search.

Many consumers of search engine services are very visual, in that they may better comprehend data and information if presented in a logical graphic format showing interactions and relationships; a new search engine service instaGrok does precisely that. By entering a search term in the search box at the top of the page, www.instagrok.com displays a graphical representation of the search results, clearly showing the relationships between the results, allowing the user to better find the results that he is seeking. According to the instaGrok website, “instaGrok presents each topic as an interactive visual interface, allowing the user to quickly grasp important concepts, key facts and relationships.” The term “grok” may appear to be some onomatopoeia from “Star Trek,” but it actually has a definition, according to the instaGrok website, “grok (v): to understand thoroughly and intuitively.”

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Unlike the more traditional search engines, instaGrok filters the results based on a selectable “Difficulty Level” slider on the top of the results page which coincides with the academic level of the user, ranging from a basic elementary school level (left on the slider bar), to a high school level (middle), to a college or professional level of content (slider to the right). Graphically, this slider displays an “ABC’s black-board” to an Einstein caricature, to indicate the level of the display. instaGrok sees itself as both a search engine and an educational tool, with features beneficial to individuals at all levels as well as features geared to classroom and academic use. The educational utilization of instaGrok is embedded on the mission statement, “Our mission is to help everyone discover the joy of learning and empower them to be lifelong learners. So we are dedicated to building innovative technology to enable engaging, safe and personalized learning.

Like the more mainstream search engines, instaGrok can quickly find information on any topic, displaying the search results in real-time. The instaGrok graphical display shows relational results from web pages, images, videos, and forums, but, unlike its competitors, filters out spam, shopping sites, profanity, and pornography.

As an experiment, I entered several search terms into the instaGrok search box to examine the results. I entered “Lamar Institute of Technology,” which promptly displayed a graphical representation of the results, looking somewhat like an atomic structure or solar system; instaGrok calls this a “concept cloud.” In the most basic view (Difficulty Slider to the left) “Lamar Institute of Technology” was in the center or nucleus, and radiating from it were 10 “satellites,” each with terms such as “train,” “review,” “college,” “service,” “program,” and “school.” Clicking on the displayed term “train” opened a subset indicating some of the programs, costs, scholarship information, and other training information. On the right side of the window are a series of headers displaying key facts, websites, videos, images, and other links. Sliding the “Difficulty Slider” to the center (high school level), and then to the right (academic) displayed a similar number of satellite topics, but with greater detail and complexity as the slider was moved.

Clicking on the “Websites” button on the right side of the page opens a new display in a chart format with the headings “Like,” “Preview,” “Difficulty,” and “Concept Cloud.” In the “Like” column are two small icons, a push pin and a trash can; the push pin icon is to “pin” the results in a registered version (details below), while the trash can might be used to hide that particular selection. The “Preview” column provides a summary of the content included in each website, while the “Difficulty” column utilizes an icon to show the reading level of the particular websites similar to the icons on the “Difficulty Slider,” with an “ABC blackboard” indicating that the website results are appropriate for elementary school level, a graduation cap and diploma indicates high school level content, and Einstein indicates college level content. The “Difficulty Slider” controls the levels of content displayed on this page. The “Concept Cloud” graphically displays how a particular website is linked to other websites.

While the initial search results are displayed graphically, on the top of the graphics display is a “Journal” tag, which when opened, appears to be a word processor like display, with common word processor controls and features. This journal feature allows the user to compile or report on what is found in the search process. Anyone can use the journal feature, printing or emailing the journal contents, but registration is required in order to save a journal on the instaGrok server.

instaGrok offers four levels of service, two of which are totally free, and two of which are paid and intended for classroom or other academic use. The two free levels of service are “Anonymous” and “Registered” and differ in the number and level of services available. The free Anonymous level is available to everyone, and does not require any registration; instaGrok simple says, “Just use it!” Anonymous users get the visual (graphical) interface, key facts, websites, quizzes, glossary, videos, and images, and can use the adjustable “Difficulty Slider.” The free “Registered User” level adds the ability to customize and share the graphical concept maps, and save search history and journals. In the headings on the right side of the page is an additional listing for registered users, “My Pins” which stores web links “pinned” (selected) from the websites displayed.

There are two paid versions of instaGrok which are intended for teachers and classroom use at all levels, and these paid versions are each \$35 per calendar year. These paid “Classroom” and “Edmodo” versions add a “Teacher Dashboard,” suppress any advertising (no ads appear on these paid versions), enhanced “safe content” displays, and priority technical support. The “Teacher Dashboard” allows the teacher to monitor the search results and progress of the students, view students’ journals, and

evaluate quiz results from the quizzes integrated into the search function and displayed on the right side of any search results. The “Edmodo” level of registration integrates instaGrok into the established and popular Edmodo teacher - student collaboration software already used by many teachers.

instaGrok is an interesting alternative to the more traditional search engines, while it also integrates well into academic environments at all educational levels. The graphical interface takes some minimal experience to become familiar with it, but is easy to master. For those looking for a change from the major search engines, instaGrok is worthy of a try.

WEBSITES:

<http://www.instagrok.com>

<http://www.instagrok.com/brochure.pdf> (Brochure in PDF format)

<https://www.techsupportalert.com/content/amazing-site-gets-you-speed-any-subject.htm>

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/grok>



The Case of the Missing Recycle Bin

Q. Without warning, my Recycle Bin disappeared. Do you have any idea where it went or how I can get it back?

A. Computers do things like this periodically just to let us know who is really in charge. There are several things you can try to return your Recycle Bin to the Desktop: In Windows Vista and 7, click Start > Search and type in “recycle bin.” From the search results, click Show or Hide Common Icons on the Desktop. In the Desktop Icons section, place a check mark next to Recycle Bin, then Apply > OK. You will also note the option to Restore Default.

In Windows XP, right click your Desktop and choose Properties > Desktop tab > Customize Desktop button. In the middle of the Desktop Items dialog box you will see several icons. Click the one for the Recycle Bin, then click the Restore Default button. Click OK and your Recycle Bin should be back to its full and upright position on the Desktop.

If it isn't, don't abandon hope! Instead, right-click an empty area of your Taskbar. From the menu that appears, click Toolbars > Desktop. The word Desktop will then appear at the end of your Taskbar, with a double arrow beside it. Right-click the arrows and you will see an option for the Recycle Bin. Drag and drop that Recycle Bin item to your Desktop, which will resolve the problem.

Q. I am using Windows 7 and cannot figure out how to change to single clicking. Can you help?

A. To change settings so instead of having to double-click anything, you can single-click, in the Start > Search field type “folder options,” then click the search result. In the Folder Options dialog box that appears, select “Single-Click to Open an Item (Point to Select)” from the Click Items as Follows section. Click the Apply > OK to save your

changes and exit. Your mouse will now be happy to respond to your single-clicks instead of double-clicks.

I would suggest saving these instructions should you decide that single-clicking is not for you. Many people try it but ultimately find it confusing because they are so accustomed to double-clicking certain items. But give it a try and see what you think.

Q. My computer shows time in the 1:30 PM format. I prefer the military version of time, that being 13:30. How can I change that? I'm using Windows XP.

A. To display military time, go to your Control Panel > Regional and Language Options > Customize button > Time tab and choose HH:mm:ss from the drop-down menu. Click Apply > OK to save and exit.

Q. How can I change the default font in Word 2007?

A. Open a new Word document, then click Font in the Font group and choose the font style and size that you want to use as your default. Click Default and a dialog box will open and ask if you want to make the change to all new documents based on the Normal template. You do, so click OK. Close then reopen Word and enjoy your new default font.

Mr. Modem's DME (Don't Miss 'Em) Sites of the Month

100 Most Beautiful English Words

Words are my life, tragic as that may be, but I was most impressed by the number of words on this list that were new to me. All words are mellifluous (which is also on the list) and roll off the tongue. The site, courtesy of LiteraryTourist.com, presents an excellent opportunity to improve one's vocabulary, as well.

<http://bit.ly/1082tbn>

Pocket Calculator Show

The '70s and '80s introduced the world to a variety of new consumer electronic products such as pocket calculators, the Walkman, boom boxes and other aural annoyances. This site celebrates those gadgets, so if you want to reminisce about the good old days or check out the primitive "high-tech" devices we once used, this site is a hoot.

www.pocketcalculatorshow.com

Twisted Sifter

This is a picture-of-the-day site with a twist: Every day at 5 PM (Eastern), the site posts the most stunning image encountered during that day. There are a number of navigation options: You can scroll down the page and click whatever images tickle your fancy, or you have the option of using the navigation strip at the top of the page with its various sections. You also have the option of checking out whatever is being featured in the rotating selection of featured articles. The only thing I would steer clear of are the links at the bottom of the pages of picture sets because they tend to link to other Web sites, some of which may be offensive and some of which are questionable at best. Stick with Twisted Sifter and you won't go wrong.

<http://twistedsifter.com>

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If You Agree, Check the Square Box!

by Ralph Smoyer

Vice President, Lehigh Valley Computer Group, PA

If you agree to the following list of items please place a check mark in the small square box.

How often have you seen this line? Well I have seen this line many, many times before, and I have also personally entered that check mark in that box at least one time too often.

You see I downloaded a McAfee computer virus protection program via the Internet approximately three years ago and dutifully check marked the square box. I thought the McAfee program worked quite well! However, I have belonged to the Lehigh Valley Computer Group for many and I often use a lot of the knowledge that I get at our meetings. Well about three years ago one of our instructors mentioned that Microsoft offers a free virus protection plan, and I jumped on it. Wow, I could save \$50.00+ bucks a year.

I chose to use my newly gained knowledge from the LVCG, and my present virus, malware, and spyware protection is Microsoft Security Essentials (free from Microsoft) and yes I did check mark the square box to have it actuated. It works great.

The bottom line of this article is that sometime in mid-2012 I checked my monthly credit card statement a little more thoroughly than usual, and I found that the \$50.00 bucks that I thought I was saving a year was still being deducted from my credit card by McAfee.

I then e-mailed, talked to them by phone, sent a letter, re-sent the letter via Certified mail! All to no avail.

My final realization was that I had to file a civil case with my local magistrate. I filed the paperwork, paid the court fees up front, and waited for my court date. On my court date the defendant, (McAfee, headquartered in California) did not show. The judgment was in my favor and I received the McAfee 2012 credit card cost of \$50.00 + bucks, and all of my court fees.

When talking by phone with a McAfee representative I mentioned that I didn't order their virus protection product this year and she replied, yes you did when you checked the square box. I then noted to her this could go on forever, and she agreed yes it could. I guess I now saved \$50.00 bucks a year, and possibly forever, even for my heirs.

From the February 2013 issue of The LVCG Journal, newsletter of the Lehigh Valley Computer Group. Courtesy of APCUG.



Misery from Social Media

by Greg Skalka

President, Under the Computer Hood User Group, CA

Does Facebook make you miserable? I know I get depressed when I think about all the time people waste on social media sites, spending hours looking at what other people are doing or raising imaginary crops on Farmville. I get perturbed when I read about those bird-brains that spend all their time tweeting their every action, and the twits that follow them. I'm not sure what is higher on the worthless scale in that case, being the tweet-er or the tweet-ee (at least the tweeter is writing something).

Now there may be proof that all this social media connectivity is bad for our mental health. A joint study conducted by two German universities indicates that use of social media sites like Facebook causes increased feelings of envy. Researchers reported that one in three people felt worse and more dissatisfied with their lives after visiting these sites. "We were surprised by how many people have a negative experience from Facebook, with envy leaving them lonely, frustrated or angry," said researcher Hanna Krasnova from the Institute of Information Systems at Berlin's Humboldt University.

This is not very surprising to me. The tendency of most people to post mostly positive information about themselves, their families, and their activities, and leave off the unflattering bits tends to skew what is seen on these sites. I'm sure some use social media as the high tech way to brag. When faced with glowing reports of friend's lives and activities and beautiful photos of their latest adventures, a viewer's feelings of inadequacy seem a reasonable result of the social media experience. The study did report that vacation photos posted by others was the biggest cause of resentment. How surprising. Second was social interactions, where being able to compare against others the number of birthday greetings received or comments and "likes" on photos and posts produced envy.

The researchers noted that these feelings of envy prompted users to boast more about their own activities, which I would think would result in more angst overall for Facebook users, as everyone competes to report having the most impressive lives. It reminds me of the feelings I recall having when my wife and I would go out to tour model homes on the weekends, not to buy but to get decorating ideas for our own home. We would leave our house feeling reasonably satisfied with it, but interested in making it just a little better. We would return from touring these fabulously decorated and ridiculously neat model homes with the feeling that our house was a dump. It would have been better for our mental health and overall happiness if we had never gone looking. I wonder if we will someday find it is the same with social media?

A Hard Drive In Your Pocket

Ignore those that say you can't take it with you - now you can. When you need to carry around a lot of data, Kingston is there for you. They announced the 1 TB version of the DataTraveler HyperX Predator 3.0 flash drive at CES, which is expected to be available in the first quarter of this year. It will allow you to carry a hard drive's worth of data with you and access it at USB 3 speeds. You will have room in your pocket for it, however, as the price will empty your pockets, wallet, and more. "Greg's Rule of Flash Drive Pricing" says not to pay more than \$0.50 per GB for flash drive storage, and you can do that for drives up to 32 GB. Unfortunately, the 512 GB version of this drive is priced at \$1300 (\$2.50 per GB), and the 1 TB version is expected to fetch over

\$2500, about what you would pay for 35 1 TB 3.5" hard drives.

The Extermination of the Mouse

Those of us who were at the January general meeting at the Microsoft Store in the Fashion Valley Mall saw a demonstration of Windows 8 on a large display screen connected to a touch screen computer. The touch screen is one way to get rid of the mouse in our computing lives. Another way is coming from a company called Leap Motion (<http://www.leapmotion.com/>). They are producing a product that will allow you to interact with your computer without a mouse, using hand gestures similar to those controlling the computers shown in the movie *Minority Report*. Think of it as a Microsoft Kinect interface for your hands only. You can interact with your computer through hand waves, pinches, and other gestures more intuitive than a mouse can allow. You can pre-order their 3D hand gesture control capability for \$69.99. The small hardware motion controller, the size of a pack of gum, plugs into a USB port and sits in front of your monitor. With the Leap Motion software, they claim it can track individual finger movements to 1/100th of a millimeter. If this becomes real like Kinect, it could make the mouse obsolete.

What's Going into the Gadget Graveyard by the End of 2013?

My column last month contained my predictions for the next year. One of them was that desktop and laptop computers would continue to hold their own against the onslaught of tablets and smart phones. I'm happy to report that my prediction is in line with the 2013 Gadget Graveyard predictions made by IEEE, the world's largest technical professional organization. Their survey of IEEE members, engineers, engineering students and CES attendees predicts that desktop computers should live on for at least another year.

Smart phones also will not yet force cameras, car keys, or GPS systems into the gadget graveyard. What are most likely to head for extinction are entertainment devices like CDs, radios, MP3 players, DVDs, and cable boxes, as streaming services for audio and video continue to gain in popularity. The consensus was that paper-based items, including printers and paper money, would be around a while longer.

I think I will hang onto my DVDs and MP3 players, as they may provide the only entertainment I will get this year. The problem with Internet streaming services is bandwidth, and in just one month I've found mine to be more limited than I thought. I've got cable Internet at home that typically shows a 12 Mbps or greater download speed (often approaching 20 Mbps), but recently I was confronted with web pages that would not load on my computer. Something was bogging down my Internet access. I went downstairs to find my wife watching an episode of *Downton Abbey* on her Kindle Fire HD tablet, while my son was downloading something on his Google Nexus tablet. It is kind of like the water we San Diegans get from the Colorado River.

At the state line it is an impressive flow, but if enough users turn on the tap at the same time, all I'm likely to get is a trickle. All these new tablets are thirsty for bandwidth, so I may need to wait until everyone has gone to bed before I can pay the bills online. Meanwhile, as they are screaming for more bandwidth, I can watch my DVDs on my laptop in peace (as long as I have on my noise canceling headphones, that is).

A Warning from the Cable Company

As if limited bandwidth isn't bad enough, I recently received a warning from Road Runner/Time Warner that I had an infected computer. When I tried to access the

Internet through a browser, a web page popped up that appeared for be from Time Warner. It appeared in the same manner that an initial web page would on a hotel Internet connection, requiring a log in or acceptance of terms before proceeding to the Internet. This page warned me that they had “received a report of suspected virus activity from a machine connected to the cable modem” on my Internet connection. The page provided links to Microsoft’s free Malicious Software Removal Tool, as well as McAfee anti-virus software that I could download for free as a subscriber. It also warned me that I could be in violation of their Acceptable Use Policy and could have my access suspended. To proceed to the Internet, I had to click on a button that indicated I was aware of this issue and would clean and secure my computers.

I regularly scan my computers for viruses and malware, but occasionally have guests, like my son’s girlfriend’s laptop, connect to my network. I was also not sure how regularly my son maintains his PCs. I persuaded my son to install a free antivirus to take the place of his expired software, but he found no infections. I scanned my laptop and desktop, but found no problems there. When I scanned my wife’s desktop, the antivirus did find something that was reported as part of a trojan, and eliminated it.

I don’t know if that was the “reported” problem, or how it was that a problem was detected by the cable company. The web message said to contact my local cable office for further questions regarding this incident, but knowing how much fun it is to try to get useful information out of them over the phone, I never made an attempt to learn more. So far my cable Internet access has not been cut off.

February 2013 issue of DriveLight, newsletter of the Under the Computer Hood User Group in CA.

Volunteers Needed

Computers for Refugees (CFR) was created in 2009 to provide and care for computers for the refugee community. Each computer is loaded with educational software and interactive games developed by CFR including several programs for learning English that speak. Since its inception CFR has made almost 600 home visits to donate and service computers.

Currently CFR is looking for volunteers to help repair the donated computers and load them with software. If anyone is interested please contact Bill Perkett at:

perkettbill@yahoo.com or call 585-338-3861

We also need windows computers, monitors, and speakers.

10 Ways Your Smartphone Camera Can Make Life Easier

by Guy McDowell

Writer, MakeUseOf.Com

Does your phone have a camera on it?" said no one since 2005. Nobody even asks how many megapixels your phone's camera has anymore. With the ubiquity of smartphones today and the resolution of the cameras they have in them, why does anyone even sell a point-and-shoot digital camera anymore? All you need is a decent smartphone to take your vacation pictures and click a button to upload them to Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr, wherever.

1. Take a Picture of Your Kids

Yes, those of us blessed with the fun-sized versions of ourselves take pictures of our kids constantly. We do this so we can see them grow, and remember those moments that we seem to only cherish after the fact. Those pictures are almost priceless.

However, it is your children that are priceless. If you are going to a big outing, perhaps an amusement park, or even the mall, take a picture of them. Don't say you did this in case they get lost or abducted – that would just create unnecessary fear. Take the photo as if you were just capturing the moment they arrived at your recreation destination. Now you have a photo of exactly how they look and what they are wearing on that day. Even if they should just happen to wander to the toy section in the store, you can share that photo with store workers or security guards to help find them. This tip alone will make your life easier and less stressful.

2. Where Did These Come From?

If you need to take something apart to try to repair it, use your phone camera to take a picture of the item BEFORE you get after it with a butter knife. Take pictures at every stage of the disassembly. Now you have something to guide your reassembly efforts and jog your memory as to where each part belongs. Plus, should you feel the desire to share your handiness on the Internet, you have documentation of what you did. You never know, you might be the first person to find an easy way to fix something and help someone else.

3. Why I Was Late For Work

Recently, where I live was hit by a winter storm named Nemo. Which was a good name for it, because after all the snow fell and the winds drifted over anything that stood still, you would have a hard time finding anything. Our one car sat through the storm, dutifully waiting to be driven until today. When I went out to the car, I knew I would have to shovel around it and maybe put some traction sand down. That went all fine and dandy, but backing out over the rest of the driveway proved difficult. The car slid on the ice and ended up in a bit of a snow bank. So, I took pictures.



Yes, that's my car in the picture. I got to work on time, but had someone questioned me, I could show them what I was up against.

4. Can You Tell Me What Your Computer is Doing?

Many of us are familiar with the Print Screen button and using screen capture software, and may have even used them to document a computer issue. Those tools are fine for systems that are functioning properly. Then there are those systems that just won't let you do anything. Take a picture of the screen and e-mail it from your smartphone to whomever is trying to help you with your computer. Instantly, they will see what you see. With that information, the rate at which they can fix the problem has just increased rapidly. This tip applies to just about any malfunctioning device really.

5. Nice Layout. Too Bad About the Lighting.

If you're a budding photographer, use your phone to take pictures of potential subjects at different times during the day, or even the year. Take pictures of your subject from different angles and different distances or viewpoints. This will help you

to understand how the natural lighting and environment affects your subject.

6. But Marks and Spencer Has This Item for 5p Less!

People are finally getting a little smarter about their shopping habits and not willing to just pay whatever the store wants. Your smartphone camera can go a long way in helping you to negotiate a lesser price. Of course, there are the fancy apps that allow you to use the camera to scan barcodes or QR codes and compare prices at different retailers. Unfortunately, those only work on items with codes that actually have information in the application's database. But if you can take a picture of the item showing its price, you now have proof you can use with that store's competitor to get the price that you want.

7. What Was the Phone Number for That Car for Sale?

Most people buy used cars, and many buy them from someone who just wants to sell their car. So when you're out and about looking at cars, take pictures of it with the cellphone. Take pictures of the 'for sale' sign so you have the name and number to call and any other information written on it. Take pictures of as much of the car as you can including dents and dings. That will help you in negotiations. You might come to a tentative deal on the phone, then show up later and the car has a new ding. Now you can prove that it does and push lower.

8. It Wasn't Like That When I Sent It

Recently we shipped a friend's car out west. The shippers broke the spoiler on the car. Had we thought to take a picture of the car before they loaded it, we could have made our friend's life easier. They could have easily shown that the car was fine before it went on the truck. This little trick can apply to ANYTHING that you ship. As another example, some manufacturers now take pictures of each shipment before it goes out the door. You can see the waybill, bill of goods, and the items in the shipment. This protects them, and you, from things going missing.

9. Ibid

Are you a college or university student? Are you doing lots of research in the reserved or special collections? Whip out the cell phone, take pictures of the relevant pages as well as the ISBN, Cover, and the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication page. Now you can use that information to properly annotate and document your research, at your leisure. The book called, "Wireless Networking in the Developing World" is a good read, look it up. Man, I wish I had that when I was in school. Back then photocopies were sometimes as much as 50 cents a piece and you can't photocopy a lot of the ancient texts that I used.

10. How Did That Get In There?

Kids put weird things in weird places. Two of those places are the nose and ears. With the cellphone's flash on, you can use the camera function almost like a scope to see what they've done now. Of course this works for adults too, if there's maybe an ear infection or an abscessed tooth. It's your camera. Where you put it is up to you! But wait, there's more...

We could go on all day about different ways to use your smartphone camera to make your life easier or simpler.

Don't have a mirror handy while trying on fab hats? Take a picture!

11. See something you'd like to get your spouse, but you're not sure if they'd like it? Take a picture!

12. See someone driving a car and reading a book at the same time? Take a picture!

13. Trying to lose weight and need to keep a food log? What do you think you should do? Yes, take a picture!

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/10-ways-your-smartphone-camera-can-make-life-easier/>

<http://goo.gl/LB6u1> *Courtesy of APCUG.*

Amazing Tale of a Satisfying Call to Tech Support

by Judi Shade

Mac Monday Volunteer, Hilton Head Island Computer Club, SC

I recently acquired a Dell laptop with Windows 7 to start working on a database project that only could only be accessed on a PC and used through Internet Explorer. The database program also required that I be able to print various pdf files, Word files and screen shots. Since I am a long-time computer user (PowerMac), I also have two HP printers – an older, very reliable LaserJet and an equally old HP All-in-One. Neither printer has WiFi capabilities, but both are USB printers.

Thinking this would be easy, I ran a USB printer cable from my HP LaserJet P2035n directly to my laptop and the printer icon appeared in the devices window along with a big yellow triangle telling me I had the infamous ‘issue’ problem and would I like to “troubleshoot.” “Of course,” I told the machine and lo and behold, the little Dell that couldn’t, came back and said “sorry, Charlie, there is no driver available for your antique printer.”

Funny thing though, on HP’s own web site, the driver not only exists, but I had already easily downloaded it. But, it would not install. I did not want to buy a 3rd printer and I needed to print desperately – paperwork was backing up. So even though I knew HP’s customer support reputation from years back (prefer a trip to the dentist than to be on hold button hell with HP), I went to HP’s web site again for Tech Support and surprisingly (?) HP has outsourced tech support. BUT, and this is a big but, to a company that can actually do technical support for all kinds of software and hardware.

So I punched in the 877 number and got “Sam” in New Delhi who listened to my tale of woe and whose first question was, “If you own a Mac, why would you ever get a PC?” That is honestly what he said! Anyway, he assured me he and “Michael” could make my old HP printer work perfectly with my Dell. Thirty-five minutes (and \$149.99) later, my printing problems were resolved. There were programs on the hard drive that had to be activated and some removed in order for Windows 7 to allow a driver from an ‘old’ HP printer to be used.

Even though I paid slightly more for the call than the cost of a newer, inexpensive printer, I do not end up with 3 printers on my desk and my LaserJet prints nice and fast and reliably.

Anyone with an old HP, I would encourage you to use the new HP Tech Assist number (the company is called Upquake Technical Services) to bring extended life to your printer or any other device you may have. Sam and Michael were both excellent!

Sam and Michael were much better than the old Help Desk.

From the February 2013 issue of The Islander, newsletter of the Hilton Head Island Computer Club, SC. Courtesy of APCUG.

[Editor’s note: I had a recent problem with an HP printer refusing to install and resolved it very satisfactorily by email (I dealt with George and Chris – I have no clue

where they are located). I mention it only because the email solution had the virtue of being *totally free*.]

External Storage

by Dick Maybach

Brookdale Computer Users' Group, NJ

Although we use external storage much less than in the early days of home computing, it is still an essential technology for backing up internal hard disks, exchanging files among different computers, and expanding storage capacity. The increasing size of files had made obsolete many older technologies, and those that are still attractive fall into four types: electronic, optical, magnetic, and Internet.

There are many variations of electronic storage, but two are now dominant, USB memory sticks and SD cards. They have similar capacities with current “sweet spots” (capacities where the cost per byte is lowest) of around 16 Gbytes, although this is continually moving up. SD cards are typically faster, but appear to be less rugged with exposed connections and thinner packages. I have carried a naked USB memory stick in my key case for many years, and it has never failed, but I always keep my SD cards in their plastic cases. USB sticks have the further advantage that every computer has USB connectors, while SD access is less common, and although memory card readers available are very cheap, they also have low quality and often are unreliable. The circuits used for electronic storage do have finite lifetimes, in that they wear out after a (very large) number of writes; however, the risk is negligible for external storage devices.

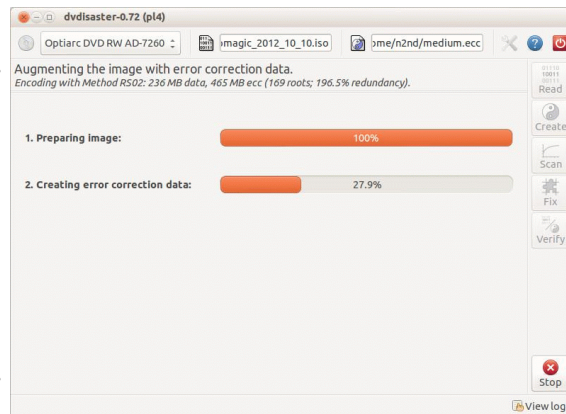
Optical storage is problematic, because much the available media is of poor quality and may begin to develop errors in just a few months. Even high-quality media rapidly deteriorate if exposed to high heat or humidity. For more on this, see my article, *Using DVDs for Long Term Storage*, BCUG Bytes, June 2008, available at <http://www.bcug.com>. Actually, my own experience with CD-ROMs and DVDs has been good, although I'm careful to use only quality media. Of the dozens stored at home, some for several years, I've had problems with only one, which can be read only on the drive that created it. On the other hand, the outer tracks of several music CDs stored in my car are no longer playable. Another problem is the low quality of CD-ROM and DVD drives, with Blu-Ray being especially bad. Blu-Ray drives are acceptable for play-back, but their lasers frequently burn out after writing just a few discs. This is unfortunate, as the capacities of CD-Roms and DVDs are rapidly becoming too low to be really useful.

If you use optical storage for archiving, consider using the free program *dvd disaster* (<http://dvd disaster.net/en/>) for Linux, OS-X, and Windows, which adds error-correction and thus allows you to recover your stored files, even though up to 20 percent of the bits on the medium are corrupted. You need a disk-burning program that can create a file (called an iso-image) that is a bit-for-bit image of a CD-ROM or DVD and also has the ability to copy an iso-image to an optical medium. The procedure for creating an error-resistant disk is the follows.

- ① Use your disk burner to create an iso-image, which must be at least 20 per cent smaller than the capacity of the medium.
- Use *dvd disaster* to add error-correcting data to the iso-image. The screen-shot below shows this in progress. After creating this image, click on the *Verify* button to check that it's good.

- Finally, use your disk burner to write the iso-image to the optical medium.

(Note the small blue circle containing a question mark at the upper left of the screen-shot. Clicking on it brings up an extensive manual in your Web browser, which you should read carefully.) Periodically scan your optical media (using dvdshaster's *Scan* button) for errors. If they begin to appear, recover the data using dvdshaster (which will produce an iso-image), create a new disk, and discard the one with the error. Until the medium begins to develop errors, you can read it like any other disk using your usual software.



Magnetic storage, in the form of external hard disks, offers high transfer speed and high capacity, making it attractive for many applications. It also has the lowest cost per byte. To achieve this performance, these devices are assembled with very tight clearances, which means they must be sealed against air-borne contamination. The magnetic disks cannot be separate from the motor and head assemblies, making these devices much larger and less rugged than electronic storage devices. Here, you have a choice of interfaces with USB being the most common, followed by E-SATA. USB-3 drives are beginning to appear, but are considerably more expensive than USB-2, although this will surely change, probably soon. Diskettes are now obsolete, for good reasons. Their capacities are tiny, and their reliability is low. You can still buy drives, but their quality is very poor, with many delivered dead-on-arrival or failing very quickly. If you still have valuable data on diskettes, you should transfer it to a better medium soon.

Internet storage, commonly called “the cloud” is expanding rapidly. Modest capacities, up to around five Gigabytes, are widely available without charge. Transfer rates can be low, often just a few tens of kilobytes per second, and of course, the storage is available only if you have an Internet connection. There are also concerns about how secure the data is and whether it will continue to be available if the vendor goes out of business.

Which of these approaches you use depends on your application. For synchronizing the data among your own computers, Internet storage is the most convenient. Once you have set it up, the contents of the synchronized directories are always identical, no matter which computer you use to make changes. Since the information resides on every PC, you lose nothing if the cloud vendor discontinues the service.

For transferring files between your PC and a friend's, a USB memory stick (up to a few Gbytes) or a USB hard disk (for larger transfers) is the best choice. Almost every computer has a USB port, so your friend doesn't need to install any special software or hardware to affect the transfer. I always carry an eight-Gbyte USB memory stick, formatted as FAT-32, in my key-case, and I've never found a computer that couldn't read from and write to it. (Actually, my stick has two partitions, a seven-Gbyte FAT-32 one for transferring files, and a one-Gbyte Linux one containing Parted Magic. See my article *Parted Magic: Lots of Disaster-coping Tools*, BCUG Bytes, April 2012, available at <http://www.bcug.com>. This means I always have the ability to transfer files and a tool kit to solve computer problems.)

For backing up your PC, and external hard disk is the only reasonable solution. These feature high capacities, fast transfer rates (especially if equipped with a USB-3 interface), and high reliability. Their bulk and relative high fragility are not serious problems in this application.

External hard disks are also good for archiving things like photos and financial data, but you could use DVDs, provided you add error-correction using and store them in a benign environment. For added security, consider making more than one copy, and either transfer the information to new media every few years or periodically scan it for errors using `dvdisaster`. Archival storage is an especially difficult problem. Computer technology is changing fast, and you must stay alert lest you lose the ability to access your archives (as happened to me when 5 ¼ inch diskette drives disappeared from PCs). For example, if you used `dvdisaster` to safeguard your archived DVD, you must be sure not only that the program runs on your new PC, but also that it uses the same methods as those used to record the data, and of course the new PC must be able to read DVDs.

For sharing photos or files with friends, Internet storage is hard to beat, although mailing them a DVD or CD-ROM also works well, especially if they want to show the pictures to their friends.

To expand internal disk storage capacity, the preferred solution is an external hard disk with an E-SATA interface, although USB-3 is not a bad solution. Most likely, you would use E-SATA for a desktop, since it requires an expansion card, and USB-3 on a laptop (USB-2 if your laptop is older or not top-of-the-line). Mac owners could consider Firewire or Thunderbolt.

As you can see, there is no single solution, unlike in ancient times when diskettes were universal (or if we go back to near pre-history, cassette tapes, audio tapes, punched paper tape, or even punched cards). However, there is a good and inexpensive solution for every application.

From the March 2013 issue of BUG Bytes, newsletter of the Brookdale Computer Users' Group, NJ. Courtesy of APCUG.

Organizing and Backing Up

by Diane Fahlbusch

President, ICON PC User Group, Long Island, NY

We all have LOTS of files saved to our computers as well as on other hardware, such as MP3 players, camera cards, thumb drives and CDs/DVDs, and the cloud. The problem with having lots of hard drive space and cheap mass media storage is that, well, we use them...a LOT, and often store way too much. The first problem is finding the files you want quickly when you want them amidst all that you have. Think about this:

Why did I create and save this file? Wow! I have this?! I was just playing. It had a purpose once upon a time. It has nifty information. It saves me from looking it up again. It's a wonderful trip down memory lane. I really wanted it! I use it frequently. I need it for work. It's precious to ME. It's precious to me AND others. It's important stuff. I need it for work or a specific project. It's legally required.

Only you can determine how important your files are, but start rethinking what you save in the first place.

The second problem is what happens if you lost this file. Here are some things to consider:

What will your reaction be? None because you forgot it was there. Say “So what.” Pout for a few minutes. Cry for a few hours. Lose a night’s sleep. Have a panic attack until I figure out how to rectify it. Curl up in a fetal position for numerous days. Take a sudden trip to the ICU ward of your local hospital.

What would I do if I lost it? Not even realize it’s gone. Say “Oops” and forget about it. Recreate it easily. Spend a lot of time recreating it. Spend more money to get another copy. Be unable to recreate it. Lose your job or spouse. Be in potential legal trouble.

If you are the beginning point in the scale, you REALLY need to clean out files. If you are on the later end of the scale, you REALLY need a Backup plan. But do you just want to duplicate that big messy “pile”? So it’s time for:

Organization

Files are useless if you can’t find them when you need them. You first must get in the habit of using meaningful names for your files, and try to keep them short. Advanced search options do allow you to search for a word or phrase in the document and on your entire hard drive. But that can be time consuming. The programs we use want to save files where the programmers decided to set up as the default location. YOU need to take control of this by remembering to select the “Save” location or you are at their mercy. (Of course, it helps if you had initially set up some organization prior to doing this. However, you can still do it after the fact.)

It’s up to you how you want to organize your folders and files. One of the best ways to think about how to organize them is by considering how you would do it if they were all paper documents. Most people would get a filing cabinet and use some kind of system, such as tax returns in one sections, legal certificates in another but fairly close, other legal documents, banking, etc. Well, do that with your electronic files. Create folders and subfolders. If you use specific programs for your banking, you can create shortcuts to the programs within the folders. You may need to add even more layers, but don’t be excessive. If you maintain important documents such as tax records, I would suggest that you create folders for these that are separate from the remainder of your documents, or not even store them on your computer at all.

Most of your document files wind up in the “My Documents” folder on your Windows machine. Most programs will separate out your photos, music and videos into the “My” files of coordinating names, or in a subfolder within the specific program’s folders. The problem is that hackers and phishers know where to look for these files. You should get into the habit of creating your own folders, just as you did when everything was kept in file boxes or filing cabinets. Keep sensitive information encrypted and in folders OUTSIDE of the “My Documents folder.”

Once you have created your filing system, it’s time for the work of going through your files to make sure they still open--otherwise, why save it? Next, ascertain whether you still want or need them. One question you can ask yourself is, “Did I actually remember that I had this?” If the answer is “No,” then you might want to get rid of it. (That’s the problem with LOTS of hard drive space – we don’t get rid of anything.) Another option is to consolidate related information onto one file. (I know I started numerous documents with tips about a specific program, which I eventually just put into one document.) Depending upon how many you have, I suggest that you attack it a little at a time. You may find that you need to create more folders to accommodate the information you have accumulated.

While you are moving and checking your files, you might want to consider adding some “mouse over” information. RIGHT click the file, and then click on “Properties.” You can add comments, keywords, etc. Unfortunately, most of us do not do this. This can become very handy if you need to have the same file in multiple locations. Now you can note how many copies there are and where they are. Photos often require you to put this information in your metadata. There are programs that can help you do this, but most of the time the metadata is editable through your camera’s software. There are often batch renaming options included with this software, as well as other programs. Don’t forget to add notations about the people and places in those photos, especially if you want to share them with future generations. Now you understand what programmers mean by “document, document, document!”

Additionally or as an alternative, you could use Microsoft’s One Note to create electronic loose leaf binders of information that can help pull information together. Or you could create links to your folders and use the program Fences to keep them grouped and hidden until you want them. Or you could actually create a database that can contain even more information and hyperlinks to your documents so they are but a click away. Use what works for YOU. But it still makes sense to create order and *keep it that way*.

So you have slogged through all of your files scattered throughout the universe, created order from chaos, and provided possible cross-references and information. Great! But what happens if that drive dies? That’s why you need a

Back up Plan

The first step is making sure you have a physical medium to back up to. CDs and DVDs are quick and cheap, and there are lots of free burning programs, but they are usually not recommended, even by their manufacturers, for long term archiving of data. Thumb drives are a better option, but are also known to go bad, and do have a limited number of times they can be rewritten. (Granted, it’s a huge number, so you may want to keep a drive just for backups.) Hard drives provide the greatest longevity, and the old fashioned magnetic discs are recommended for the long haul. Of course, they can lose the data if they cross paths with a magnet. That’s why you should have at least two sets. Yep, the ol’ duplicate backup motif.

However, the aftermath of Super-storm Sandy, and her kin in other areas, proves that even if you backed up to multiple drives, they would all be lost if they are saved in the same building. Back up physically to multiple sources, and at least one site away from where your main stockpile of data is stored. This includes the cloud, or another hard drive in a safe deposit box. Why a safe deposit box? Because of the way banks are built, they will survive most natural disasters. Also consider keeping your backup drives in a refrigerator. If you can get your hands on one of those small ones that college kids use, even if it is not running. We don’t want to keep the drives chilled; we just want to protect them from fire. (The insulation in your refrigerator, but especially the freezer, is so thick that items such as these would survive a fire that destroys the entire house.) You could use one of those locking fire proof boxes, except that most thieves just grab the whole box ... but not the icebox.

Now it’s time to back up. You can just simply copy files, especially those important, costly or irreplaceable ones, to another drive, and another. But please remember that certain files may only be opened with a specific program. Look into alternative programs that might be able to import the file. (The open source Open Office and Libre Office both have a word processing program that will open most forms of MS Word

documents. You may lose some formatting, but the text will be there.) Consider saving files with formats that can be opened by other programs without imports or conversions (.odt, .pdf, or .txt). Of course, regular backups are a must.

Another alternative, especially if you have a lot of files that you want to save and are always editing them or adding new ones, but forget to back up our files is to build yourself a NAS (Network Attached Storage device). Yes, you can buy them but you can also take an old computer and build one with the cross platform open source Free NAS. Your data will be backed up as you are working on it. This will also back up your entire system if you want it to.

Another choice is to use software specifically designed to use backups. Yes, all of the Windows operating systems from at least '98 had this. The problem is that you need to restore your backups with the same operating system. So if you backed up files in the Windows XP backup THAT is the OS you will need to be using to restore them.

Of course you can always look for third party software to backup your files and your system. Most offer the option for automatic backups. Some allow you to schedule specific times, but look for those that will do automatic backups at startup and shut down, especially if your computer is on at irregular intervals. Many of these are transferrable from one operating system to another, but make sure you check. Some come with bootable discs, so you can fully restore your system, programs and files to a new hard drive if your original one died. But still consider utilizing cloud storage as an additional backup, especially since many offer some free storage space.

Finally, remember to *check your backups* to make sure that they are working properly.

From the February 2013 issue of The ICONPCUG Graphic. APCUG.

Help's Half Hour Notes

May 14, 2013

by Jan Rothfuss

Q: A member has used InfoSelect since 1999. However, AVAST has killed it, removing the .exe file. Even when reinstalled, AVAST has killed it again. How can he use it?

A: Install it again, then go to AVAST and 'exclude' that program from its scanning. It will then allow the program to run.

The Lighter Side

