

Life & times

Beware of dangling your data

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FAST LIVING



It's likely you've heard of the term "cloud computing". If not, I can assure you that it has nothing to do with some heavenly tech upgrade that allows the divine powers to track your indiscretions more easily.

It's a simple concept: rather than storing your data on your own server or hard drive, you contract out this work to a server accessed via the internet. Large companies or individuals can replace some storage and application needs with online services, ideally at a fraction of the cost. The idea has been around for quite a long time; back in the '80s several companies had plans to make computers that used the internet for all data storage. These days the various cloud-computing services are more wide-ranging and appealing. One of the most popular is Gmail, Google's web-based email program, and its associated word-processing and calendar applications. Apple's MobileMe is another, which, despite a rocky start, offers convenient data storage and access from anywhere (although nothing more just yet). There are others in the frame, like Zoho (www.zoho.com), with its more sophisticated online applications including a very good spreadsheet application. None of these, though, are comprehensive replacements for applications such as Microsoft Office, or as quick and convenient for storage as having your own server or PC, but the costs are greatly reduced. Google offers a lot of its applications free of charge – though it does charge for "premium services", that is, more powerful applications. Zoho also offers some services free to individuals. Despite the savings, there are several reasons to approach these types of service with care.

The first has engendered a new



term – "outage". Online services (even Google with its avowed 99.9 per cent uptime) are prone to downtime, when they simply don't work. Recently, Gmail went down all over the world. For some, the outage was only for three hours; for others, it lasted days. During the crisis it became apparent that some companies, even quite large ones, along with schools and other institutions, had placed all of their email with Google. When it went down... well, you can imagine the ensuing chaos. Apple's teething troubles with MobileMe are well documented and led to it offering months of free service to customers as a way of saying sorry. Many people who survived the Gmail outage have since been questioning

Google's claims of reliability, but in all honesty they should look to themselves first. There is no excuse for not backing up information stored on a home PC, and to have unbacked-up storage of any kind solely on an online server is just asking for trouble.

Unreliability, though, is not the greatest risk. Recently Google was also apologising: in this case to users of its document and spreadsheet applications, for inadvertently sharing their data without permission – data that was no doubt personal and quite possibly sensitive in business terms. Google claimed the glitch affected only 0.05 per cent of users but, still, it was a major slip and doesn't inspire confidence. And the issue is bigger than the potential



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for mistakes. Any company that stores data has total access to it, even if it swears that privacy is paramount. A recent furore involving Facebook highlights this. Last month, Facebook posted new terms of use on its site. It didn't take users long to discover that those terms included Facebook keeping messages and data from former users who had closed their accounts. Previously, these traces had been deleted when the account was closed. It's not clear for what purpose Facebook planned to use this data, but it quickly backtracked on the new terms after users kicked up a stink, rightly concerned about the ownership of the data that they had generated but weren't sure they still owned.

The recent spate of trouble for cloud computing has not gone by without attracting the attention of privacy lobby groups. In the United States, the Electronic Privacy Information Centre has asked the US Federal Trade Commission to investigate the privacy issues around Google's applications and the data it holds. But we shouldn't rely on such groups to make cloud computing safer; we as consumers must demand greater security from the sites we use. Email and the internet have become services like electricity, where service guarantees must be in place and enforced. At the same time, we all know that power cuts can happen and having a torch handy is no bad thing. The bigger issue here is that, though you may not be aware of it, your data – emails, contacts, documents – is becoming increasingly valuable. Market research companies are more and more interested in "mining" all this data to try to predict trends in consumer demand and spending patterns, and they would love access to yours. So, although cloud computing can offer cost savings and convenience, it's no excuse to dangle your data out there in the breeze for anyone to see, or hand it over to another without keeping copies. We all need to start treating our personal data as the precious thing it is.

When waiting's a prologue to pleasure and delight

SLOW LIVING



Elaine is late – again. Maybe she has forgotten? Maybe I have the wrong day? A plaguing uncertainty surfaces in the space opened by her absence.

In a culture in which "life is short" and "time is money", no one likes to wait. As Harold Schweizer says, in his wonderful meditation *On Waiting*, "Lacking the charms of boredom or desire, waiting is neither interestingly melancholic nor despairingly romantic." Waiting is cast as a nothing space that suspends the "real action" of life.

Having declared waiting unnecessary, our culture of instantaneity ceaselessly demands its annihilation. The question, "Why wait?" becomes an imperative. In this grammar of compressed time, even the humble comma – the mark of a small wait – is experiencing extinction. Robert J. Samuelson has noted, "The comma's sad fate is a metaphor for something larger: how we deal with the frantic, can't-wait-a-minute nature of modern life. We don't have time for that. No pauses allowed."

Not to have to wait is a triumph. It proves that everything is in good working order. We gladly bear the burden of checking ourselves in at the airport. Self-service displaces

customer service. If we are doing it ourselves, at least we are not waiting.

Waiting has the unnerving propensity to propel us into uncomfortable spaces of contemplation. Upheld as a practice that leads to mastery of the virtue of patience, waiting never feels much short of a torturous test of endurance.

And yet, there is beauty in waiting. It heightens our sense of expectation. Suspended in time, the excitement of impending delight grows such that anticipation is woven into the experience of pleasure as prologue – the first clause in an extended stretch of happiness. Love teaches us this pleasure of waiting: catching a glimpse of your own excitement as you pass the mirror in the hall while



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waiting for your lover to pick you up; waiting for the moment when you see the penny drop for your child who is about to put two and two together for the first time; or waiting for a loved one to open a gift you have chosen carefully. If we stop to appreciate this experience of waiting, instead of being a precursor to the action, the wait is integrated into the action, part of the pleasure. This is no longer waiting in the intransitive sense – a "waiting for". It is pure waiting, a waiting that moves beyond the horizon of expectation to open up the possibility that waiting transforms into something else.

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