I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

By Francis Sullivan

LIKE MANY UNFORTUNATE SOULS, I CARRY A LAPTOP WHEN TRAVELING ON BUSINESS—IN FACT, I EVEN CARRY ONE WHEN I TRAVEL FOR PLEASURE. I DON’T DO IT MERELY FOR THE AMUSEMENT OF THE US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY’S TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION, although TSA personnel at airports do seem to have better-than-average skills in laptop dropping, battery popping, and strange-question asking. My laptop is supposedly for doing work while on the road, but I mainly use it to keep in touch via email. That’s why when preparing for a bike trip, in addition to packing t-shirts, shorts, rain gear, sunscreen, and band-aids, I also jam a laptop into my panniers. In case anyone’s interested, if you carry a computer on your bike and you fall over, be sure you don’t land on the side carrying the machine, especially during a summer hail storm in Montana.

Until recently, I read email solely by logging into my office’s network. This scheme usually works well and, because of firewalls, smartcards, and so forth, it keeps others from getting to my main machine (I hope!). However, sometimes I forget my smartcard or something goes wrong at the firewall, and then I have to wait as long as a whole entire day to get my mail. So a few weeks ago, I signed up for Gmail. It seemingly does everything—it’s available to anyone who wants it “free” from Google, and it appears to be capable of opening almost any attachment, even if you’re running Linux on your laptop and MS Vista at the hotel business center. It offers lots of storage—in fact, it claims you never need to delete any mail (a dangerous suggestion, that!). My initial reaction to it was the passing thought that if it offered a few more services, such as \LaTeX, Matlab, a C compiler, and occasional access to a large supercomputer, I’d need only a $200 laptop to do everything I want to do. In other words, all of my computing would be done in the cloud—something like the Web-based distributed computing that Google and IBM plan to offer to students. After using Gmail for several weeks, I still like it, but I do have a few concerns about it that would worry me even if it could offer all possible cloud services. One is obvious—namely, whose email is this, anyway? Do I mind that my mail is being scanned, if only by a program?

The other day I got a message from a friend at Dartmouth. He planned to fly to Washington for an afternoon appointment and wanted to drop by my office for a chat followed by lunch before heading to another meeting. I used Gmail to read and reply to his note, so several advertisements (called “sponsored links” by Google) appeared along with his reply. The advertisements showed that the mail had to do with a flight to the Washington, DC, area, coming from Dartmouth, to a place that does something with computers, and that lunch was planned.

My other worry has to do with the idea of a large entity offering centralized services. Like having a government, centralized services are desirable for many things but also have built-in congenital dangers and defects. I’m thinking of our local telephone server’s usual reaction when I complain about the land line being down yet again: an anonymous “someone” encourages me to go outside and check the connection. If I were to do a big calculation in the cloud and a crash in the middle of it wiped out my data, who would I call? Of course, I can crash the machine on my home system, too, but at least the local system administrators will offer me a nice fluffy towel to wipe away my tears.

What Google and IBM are doing is a noble experiment that I’m sure will advance the science of computing. I support it—but I still intend to get a multicore laptop as soon as I possibly can.

P.S. Our title is from Wordsworth, but how many of you noticed you can sing his famous poem to the tune of Manfred Mann’s performance of “Do Wah Diddy Diddy”? 

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