THE NEW ATLANTIS
A JOURNAL OF TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

Notes & Briefs

Russia's Blackout, Los Alamos Woes, Paris Hilton, etc.

After the major August 2003 blackout in the northeastern and midwestern United States, spokesmen for the Russian energy monopoly Unified Energy Systems (UES) bragged to a Russian news agency that a similar breakdown was unlikely in their country. Yet on May 25, 2005, a major outage in Russia's capital left millions of Muscovites without power. Public transportation ground to a halt; water was shut off in the middle of a heat wave; an explosion triggered at a chemical plant released nitric oxide into the air; and trading on both Moscow stock exchanges was suspended.

The breakdown, which resulted in estimated economic losses of more than $70 million, set off a round of vicious finger-pointing. Anatoly Chubais—the head of UES and a longtime crusader for political and economic reforms in Russia—blamed the blackout on insufficient investment in the power grid. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in turn, blamed UES, alleging that the power outage resulted from problems the company had known about for a month but failed to address. Chubais has refused to step down, although Putin's criticism did prompt two officials at a UES subsidiary to resign.

Russian officials seem unified in claiming that the blackout was not caused by terrorism—even though there was a mysterious explosion at a power substation shortly before the blackout began. A Chechen rebel leader

has claimed responsibility for the explosion and blackout, and Chechen terrorists have been accused of targeting the Russian power infrastructure before, but it remains unclear whether the rebels were actually responsible. The incident is still under investigation.

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Merely mentioning the name of a drug to your doctor can have a tremendous influence on his thinking—and could even lead to unwarranted diagnoses and prescriptions. In a study recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a group of eighteen actresses visited doctors, portraying patients with either minor or major depression. Some of the women didn't request any drugs, some made a general request for drugs, and some explicitly mentioned Paxil, saying, "I saw this ad on TV the other night. It was about Paxil. Some things about the ad really struck me. I was wondering if you thought Paxil might help." Three-quarters of the "patients" who made a general request and half of those who mentioned Paxil were put on antidepressants, while only a third of those who made no request received a prescription. Paxil was only prescribed 3 percent of the time overall, although it was prescribed 27 percent of the time when patients mentioned it by name.

The study shows both the power of patients' suggestions on doctors' thinking and the power that drug ads can have on medical decisions. The pharmaceuticals industry has spent billions on direct-to-consumer advertising since the practice was first allowed in 1997 in the United States; in many other countries, such ads are forbidden. China is the most recent country to consider a ban. According to a report in *China Daily* in March 2005, the State Administration of Industry and Commerce blames "deceptive medicine ads" for the "2.5 million Chinese [who] take the incorrect medicine every year."

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The Los Alamos National Laboratory may soon come under new management for the first time since its establishment in 1943. With the renowned lab rocked by security scares and internal discontent, the federal government has put the contract for managing and operating Los Alamos up for bidding. The management contract of the lab's longtime overseer, the University of California, ends in September, and while the university is competing to renew the contract, another bidder—like defense contractor Lockheed Martin, a leading contender—might end up running the lab instead.

The lab's string of troubles began in 1999 with the high-profile Wen Ho Lee incident, in which the Chinese-American physicist was charged with handing secrets over to the Chinese government. Lee was eventually released with the judge's apologies when the case against him turned out to be full of holes. In the wake of that incident and mounting financial difficulties, the University of California in 2003 installed retired Navy admiral

George P. Nanos as director. He promised to "drain the swamp" at Los Alamos.

He may have gone too far. Following several disturbing incidents—a fraud scandal in which employees bought camping gear on lab credit cards, the accidental injury of a lab intern, and, most worryingly, the apparent disappearance of two computer disks with classified information—Nanos suspended work at the lab for more than half a year and spoke publicly about "cowboy" scientists and "buttheads" responsible for the lab's security lapses. The shutdown, which idled 12,000 workers and will end up costing tens of millions of dollars, was—as might be expected—unpopular with the elite lab's staff. One disgruntled employee set up a blog (lanl-the-real-story.blogspot.com) which garnered national media attention after hundreds of denunciations of Nanos appeared on it, ranging from the malcontented to the mutinous. Meanwhile, even though the Department of Energy found major security lapses at the lab, it was discovered earlier this year that the missing computer disks never really existed in the first place; their "disappearance" was nothing but a clerical error. Nanos resigned in early May.

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Microsoft has blocked users from posting terms such as "freedom," "democracy," and "Taiwan independence" to blogs on the Chinese-language version of its MSN Web portal. A Microsoft spokesman said the censoring technology, which responds to banned words with the message, "Prohibited language in text, please delete," is the result of cooperation with the Chinese government. Sexually explicit words and profanities are also blocked.

Microsoft is hardly alone in providing technologies that enable China's pervasive regime of Internet censorship, surveillance, and filtering; several other major firms have also been complicit. Defenders of the high-tech companies contend that acquiescence is the cost of doing business in a country where, according to the Associated Press, a Google search for the banned sect "Falun Gong" or for the "China Democracy Party" returns the message, "Site cannot be found."

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An article illustrating how a terrorist might use botulinum toxin to attack the United States was just days from publication in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* when it was yanked at the behest of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The article detailed a process by which a terrorist might acquire a small quantity of botulinum toxin and contaminate the nation's milk supply, killing millions of people. According to an official at HHS, the problem wasn't the article's claims about the vulnerability of the American food supply, but rather the "granularity of the detail" in its descriptions.

The author, Stanford University's Lawrence Wein, rewrote the article and submitted it to the *New York Times*

as an opinion piece, which the newspaper published under the title "Got Toxic Milk?" The piece describes a terrorist sneaking botulinum toxin into a farm's milk tank, whence it would be introduced into a milk silo and from there into refrigerators across the country. Even a 24-hour response would leave plenty of time for a third of the country's population to begin suffering from the toxin's deadly symptoms, Wein claims.

Not everyone finds the scenario Wein describes plausible. Scholars associated with GlobalSecurity.org and the Center for International and Security Studies wrote a rebuttal, describing Wein's argument as "flawed in its understanding of terrorist capabilities" and little more than a "mathematical model built upon a thin supposition regarding what terrorists can do."

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To the dismay of celebrity heiress Paris Hilton and several hundred of her closest friends, a group of young hackers managed in February to retrieve confidential information—including photographs, memos, and a list of contact information for Hilton's acquaintances—from her T-Mobile "Sidekick II," a combination phone, camera, and personal organizer. After this information was put online, fans and pranksters launched a frenzy of phone calls, ringing up stars like rapper Eminem and tennis-player-turned-model Anna Kournikova. Many of the victimized celebrities, perhaps all, changed their phone numbers in short order.

Although there are contradictory reports about how the hack was accomplished, it seems that it did not require great feats of technical wizardry. The heist appears to have begun with a simple case of what hackers call "social engineering"—in this case, a phone call in which one of the perpetrators impersonated a T-Mobile manager and duped one of the company's employees into handing over a list of accounts, after which the youngsters simply reset Hilton's password on T-Mobile's website and gained access to her address book.

While security features have, by and large, kept pace with new electronic devices and technologies, the increasing redundancy and synchronicity of data—with personal information stored simultaneously on handheld devices, home computers, Web servers and elsewhere—greatly multiplies the number of fronts on which the battle for information security will be fought.

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Simon Sek Man Ng, a nineteen-year-old New York City resident, was murdered along with his sister in his home on May 12, 2005. Ng was an avid blogger, and his final blog entry helped police track down his apparent killer, his sister's ex-boyfriend. "Anyway today has been weird, at 3 some guy ringed the bell," Ng wrote. "I went down and recognized it was my sister's former boyfriend. He told me he wants to get his fishing poles back. I told him to wait downstair while I get them for him. While I was searching them, he is already in the house. He is still here

right now, smoking, walking all around the house with his shoes on which btw I just washed the floor 2 days ago! Hopefully he will leave soon. . . " Minutes later, Ng and his sister were dead.

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The march of progress: Since the beginning of 2005, scientists have reported the discovery of genes that seem to be connected to alcoholism, age-related blindness, osteoarthritis, and dyslexia. Other genes, linked to the onset of puberty, epilepsy in dogs, the amount of sleep people require, and premature male baldness, have also been discovered. In April 2005, scientists announced that two more human chromosomes have been mapped, bringing the number of chromosomes for which complete DNA sequences have been published to fourteen. The latest to be completed are chromosomes 2 and 4, the latter of which is connected to Huntington's disease and other disorders.

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A new rule that recently went into effect in the United Kingdom eliminates the right of egg, sperm, and embryo donors to remain anonymous. Under the new system, children conceived through such anonymous donations, upon reaching the age of 18, have the legal right to learn the identity of their genetic parents. The rule is not retroactive, so donations from before April 1, 2005 can remain anonymous. Also, the rule is one-way only—it gives children the right to find their genetic parents, but does not give donors the right to trace their genetic offspring. The rule was justified on the grounds that knowing one's genetic background is often medically important.

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A helicopter has successfully landed on Mount Everest for the first time. The flight, which set records for the highest-altitude helicopter landing and takeoff, was accomplished on May 14 and repeated again the next day. Everest's summit is at more than 29,000 feet. Most helicopters cannot reach even half that altitude because the air is too thin, but this was a special high-performance chopper designed by Eurocopter, a division of the giant European defense conglomerate EADS. In the days leading up to the historic flight, the pilot, Didier Delsalle, flew rescue missions to demonstrate the machine's capabilities for Nepalese authorities.

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Norwegian-born philanthropist Fred Kavli announced this spring the creation of million-dollar prizes for outstanding scientific achievement in the fields of astrophysics, neuroscience, and nanotechnology. The awards are to be given biennially, starting in 2008.

The new prizes are partly a challenge to the century-old Nobel prizes, which Kavli reportedly considers somewhat stodgy; he has been quoted in the press as saying the prizes he has endowed will "be more daring" than the Nobels. And clearly some intra-Scandinavian pride is at stake, too. While the Norwegians get to pick the

winner of each year's Nobel Peace Prize, all the Nobel *science* prizes are awarded by Swedish institutions and most of each year's Nobel excitement centers on Stockholm. The Kavli prizes will be awarded in Oslo by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the King of Norway making the official presentation.

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Teachers, professors, and testing companies have relied for decades on computerized systems to grade standardized tests. There are now signs that educators and the testing industry are increasingly turning to computers to grade student essays. Programs for judging writing, like the "e-rater" software developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), are increasingly used to score essays connected with major standardized tests. And there is anecdotal evidence that grading software is sometimes being used to grade classroom writing as well. The makers of essay-grading software are aware of its imperfections—ETS, for instance, welcomes healthy skepticism about essay evaluating programs and suggests that they be used chiefly as "a quality control check" on human graders—but it is possible that graders, whose workload could be significantly lightened by automated assistance, will inappropriately come to rely on machines to grade essays. We only wonder whether Lionel Trilling, Irving Kristol, and other great essayists of the modern age would have passed electronic muster.

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French language authorities have for years doggedly attempted to resist the encroachment of technology-related anglicisms. For example, the French don't send "e-mail"; they send "*courriel*." Their latest effort, though, falls somewhat short. The French Ministry of Culture recently announced in one of its publications that the correct French word for "blog" is "*bloc-notes*," or just "*bloc*" for short. The resemblance to the original English word is obvious. University of Pennsylvania Professor Mark Liberman, a contributor to the "Language Log" blog, went a step further: "So, it seems, that the official French word for blog is now just 'blog' pronounced as a German would.... Several witticisms come to mind, but I'll restrain myself, at least temporarily."

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Many trips on trains in Britain are "much slower" than the same trips in the 1980s, when the government ran the train system—and in several cases, the trips are much slower than in the era of steam locomotion. As one advocate for rail passengers told the *Times* of London, "Passengers are baffled why, despite new trains and advanced signaling, their journey takes longer than it used to twenty or even fifty years ago." "On some regional routes," the paper notes, "journeys were faster when Queen Victoria was on the throne."

And, in another story for the "newer-isn't-always-better" files, a number of

recent experiments pitted some of the world's fastest "texters"—those who use their mobile phones to send text messages—against veteran Morse coders, one of whom was 93 years old. The high-tech whippersnappers were beaten, badly and repeatedly. "Texting" proved to be considerably slower than the 170-year-old code of dots and dashes, even though the texters were allowed to use common slang and shorthand, such as "UR" for "you are."

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In order to find out early whether they had been accepted, more than 200 applicants to Harvard, M.I.T., Stanford, Duke, Dartmouth, and Carnegie Mellon followed directions posted online by a hacker and broke into an independent website which those universities use for managing applications.

The different schools have taken different approaches to dealing with the breach: some made a blanket decision to deny all the electronic sneak-peekers admittance, while others have ignored the incident and granted acceptances.

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There may be a kernel of wisdom in the classic motherly adage—"If you don't stop that, you'll go blind!"—according to recent FDA reports suggesting that Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra may cause blindness in a very small number of cases. Of the 23 million men who have reportedly used the impotence drugs, 43 apparently soon suffered from "non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy" (NAION), sudden blindness brought on by blocked blood-flow to the optic nerve. It is difficult to establish a clear-cut connection between the drugs and the blindness, and in some cases the blindness and the impotence may both have been brought on by some third disorder, like diabetes or heart disease. But the manufacturer of Cialis has already added the risk of sudden blindness to the drug's label, and an FDA spokesman has said, "We take this seriously."

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Four people were hospitalized and one died in Taiwan in May after they consumed "Bullwild," an "energy drink" popular in Taiwan. According to press reports, a man named Wang confessed to placing cyanide-laced cans on grocery shelves.

The strange part of the story, though, is that Wang for some reason put labels on the contaminated bottles saying, "I am poisonous. Please do not drink"—but the victims bought and drank the bad Bullwild anyway. According to investigators, the victims apparently thought the warning was a slogan for a new advertising campaign.