/dev/random

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Let us now consider backups: boon or bane? "Boon obviously," I hear you respond with more than a soupçon of righteous indignation. Fair enough. Having an additional copy of your critical data is objectively better than the alternative; I agree. Provided, of course, that said copy is truly a copy. If, on the contrary, it is no more than a hollow shell filled with empty zeroes, that "backup" may prove less salubrious. Allow me to elucidate.

In 1997 I was a UNIX system administrator and email/DNS monkey at USGS headquarters in Reston, VA. Not long after I started that job a scientist came in and reported that he'd experienced a catastrophic laptop drive failure while in the field and needed to restore from one of the backups conducted every few months during brief visits to headquarters. I pulled the appropriate DAT tape, properly labeled and stored, and began the restore procedure. Much to my chagrin and horror, while the tape headers and log entry for the backup looked perfectly normal, there was no actual data therein residing. Frantically, I tried everything I could think of to recover at least a partial image, but it was no use. There simply wasn't anything there to recover. That volcanologist lost three full years of field research because someone (not me, thankfully) didn't bother to check the integrity of the backup process.

The point of this sad story is to show that backups aren't always what they promise to be. If you trust them without verification, sooner or later you will regret it. This cautionary principle can of course be applied across a swath of IT-related activities; at its most fundamental it warns against complacency and making presumptions. While backups themselves are, overall, Good Things To Have Around, betting the farm on those backups existing simply because they appear to exist is skating on exceptionally thin metaphorical ice.

Even properly executed backups aren't a universal panacea. There are times when you simply don't want everything recorded accurately for posterity. One might reasonably presume that the sorts of activities best forgotten are not likely to be found in a routine corporate disk image, true, but even this is not a foregone conclusion. Mistakes, indiscretions, bad ideas, erroneous data, miscommunications, poorly conceived notions, fumbling, hemming, hawing, tangents, memos you wish you hadn't written, memos you wish you hadn't read—all of these and more might be better off consigned to oblivion.

Where am I leading this parade of the obvious? Right past my flea market of invention, naturally. The idea that backing up data is a simple binary decision is outdated and probably runs contrary to all sorts of sound business practices, I guess. If not currently, then I hereby instantiate said practices such that they can be run contrary to for the purposes of furthering this diverting narrative. It feels good to take charge of my own twisted destiny.

You know how in some operating systems each file has various flags that can be set? "Archive," "Read Only," "Certified Organic," and so on? I propose we add one for "Backup Suitability." It'll have to be a metadata field rather than a simple binary flag, though. It would need at least four or five possible values, to denote Retention Desirability Quotient.

This value would range from 5 (Totally Keep This Data For All Eternity, Possibly Longer) to 0 (Civilization As We Know It Will Be Irrevocably Harmed If This File Is Not Deleted Immediately And With Extreme Prejudice). When the backup program encounters these flags, it acts accordingly.

You might at this juncture feel compelled to point out that there are already backup products available that feature very similar, if less sarcastic, functionality. To this I can only reply, "bah." My proposed program goes further, much further. There's also a predictive component that will scan each file, no matter the format, for potentially embarrassing content and—here's the best bit—report when and to what extent it will interfere with your future life. It can even modify or extract those damaging areas based on a wide range of user-configurable filters. Think of it as a sort of personal *Minority Report*. In "Forensic Avoidance" mode the program copies the dodgy file bit by bit into memory, makes the appropriate changes, and writes it to the backup image without modifying any of the administrative metadata: instant file integrity without all that messy undesirable content. The program download, incidentally, is free. The client is charged only when a file is actually backed up, on a sliding scale depending on degree of "posterity assurance" undertaken. It's all very scientific and stuff.

The whole "subscription" model for software bothers me, now that we've brought it up. It's like rent-to-own, except you never get to the "own" part. As if online privacy hasn't taken enough of a beating with adware, trackers, consumer profiling, constant account compromises, draconian digital "rights" management, and shadowy government data slurping on a beyond-massive scale, now software companies want us to borrow their products temporarily in exchange for radio tracking collars on our most intimate computer use habits.

Since we seem to have slopped our way over into targeted marketing now, let me state without fear of being regarded in any way as an original thinker that it cannot, statistically, be long before even the prime real estate of our sleep periods is being developed for advertising purposes. Do you have liberating flying dreams? Airlines and exotic travel destinations will pay handsomely for ads plopped down into those. Leave home without your pants? Clothing manufacturers have you covered.

If you're thinking that the technology to beam these ads directly into your neural landscape from some advertising studio does not exist, you're (probably) correct. However, they don't need said technology to achieve oneiric product placement nirvana. All they require is a series of carefully constructed subliminal implants: essentially, a buffer overflow for the brain. They inject the right code via TV or streaming video and it runs in batch mode in the heap of your subconscious mind. Corporations will now control your nighttime data dumps even more stringently than before. Nowhere is safe; nothing is sacred.

> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the market;
> For in that consumer's sleep what dreams may come
> When they are no longer able to change channels or
> surf away,
> Must give us profit...

Once again is the immortal bard shamelessly and tastelessly paraphrased for petty purpose. Try haddock, and let's see what slips the dogs wore.