

We live in a dicey cyber world

By Jim Nowlan

I was at a desktop computer in a public library recently when the internet went down. The distraught looks of my fellow library patrons stimulated me to wonder how they (and I) would react if a real digital disaster struck.

That same afternoon my *New Yorker* arrived, carrying a disturbing article about how so many Silicon Valley centi-millionaires and above are making plans for the apocalypse (“Survival of the Richest,” Evan Osnos, Jan. 30).

Osnos reports that as many as half of these entrepreneurs are preparing, for example, by having laser eye surgery (to anticipate loss of access to glasses and contacts). They are also buying luxury condos in underground bunkers in Kansas (I kid you not) as well as whole islands offshore and retreats in New Zealand.

What do these mostly young, very smart, tech-savvy, to say the least, people know that I don't?

According to Osnos, some worry that their advances in artificial intelligence will result in even fewer jobs for those further down the economic food chain. This might in turn cause the hoi-polloi to bring out their pitchforks and someday storm the redoubts of the one-percenters.

They apparently see a fragility in our civic society that could cause it to collapse. It's not that they think an unraveling of society is likely, but that “apocalypse insurance” is worth taking out, since they have the money to do so.

Americans have always been captivated by doomsday scenarios.

Older readers will remember the drills in grammar school where we learned to crouch under our desks to protect ourselves somehow from nuclear attack.

Today I worry less about conventional warfare than I do about the disruption of our nation's electrical grid by computer hackers[, something maybe less evocative than marauding mobs with pitchforks out of a Frankenstein movie, but more likely].

How would American society handle a total, lengthy blackout of electricity. And all that is dependent upon electricity, like digital communications and all the stuff of our daily life that requires juice from the grid? Not well, I'm thinking.

I think this is a real threat, though I am clueless when it comes to technology. There are, we all know, thousands of hackers out there, in bedrooms, or in terrorist cells, and in nations like Russia and China. They are probing for weaknesses continuously. The Holy Grail for them is to disrupt and harm.

Russia recently brought down the Ukrainian power grid for six hours, and the U.S. and Israel, as I understand it, a few years ago used malware called Stuxnet to bring down Iran's nuclear centrifuge processing machines.

I called around to federal and state agencies, and to electrical utilities sources. In large part, they bounced me around, as if nobody wanted to talk on the record about cyber-security and the grid.

[There are probably a score of federal and state agencies, plus the electric companies, in the web of cyber-security responsibility—DOE, DHS, FBI, NSC, ICC, ILCC, ILDOIT (a new one: Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology) and more.]

Scott Aaronson is executive director for security for the Edison Electric Institute, the research and trade group in D.C. for our nation's 300+ electric utility companies.

Aaronson said basically: Trust us. No problems. There has never been a cyber-attack that has affected electrical grid operations—but we must do a better job of protecting the grid!

Aaronson called the electric grid “one big North American machine (it includes Canada).”

That worries me. I do know that in our electrical-digital world, everything seems connected, as in the old Gospel tune about how the leg bone’s connected to the thigh bone, and so on.

So, could a successful attack in one part of our system cascade rapidly throughout the whole? I don’t know, as I’m still awaiting unreturned phone calls.

I have heard knowledgeable folks say that it isn’t a matter of if but rather when there will be a successful cyber-attack on our grid.”

I have a shirt-tail cousin John who is a *coureur des bois*, a reenactor of the 18th Century French trapper world. He makes his own knives, shoots and field dresses his deer, scrapes the hides and make supple leather from them, turning the leather into exquisite luggage.

When I sense the apocalypse coming, I will run out to John’s place in the country to tell him I’m signing up to be on his team. He can survive anything, I’m sure.

Until then, I will, finally, take up the recommendation of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency and purchase a kit of supplies to weather a three-day electrical outage.

After all, it’s a dicey world out there.