Many of you have no doubt noticed Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) that look like this: <http://tinyurl.com/8fnjr>. If you click on this particular URL, you will end up at my opinion page, which has the URL <http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/index.htm>. The abbreviation of long URLs (for example, I recently condensed a 232-character URL into 24 characters) is performed by a program running on a server at <http://tinyurl.com/create.php>. When a user then links to a TinyURL, the TinyURL server redirects the request to the original URL.

TinyURLs are useful whenever a long URL doesn’t fit into a limited line length. E-mail messages, for example, often break long URLs into multiple lines; so does the digital signature function of PGP software. Such broken URLs may not work at all with direct clicking or when copied and pasted into a browser address window, especially if the introduced line breaks consist of real carriage-return line-feed characters rather than simply being attributes of the display format (wrap lines).

Condensed URLs also temporarily conceal the ultimate destination of a link; I suppose that someone might use TinyURLs in spam or in phishing messages to trick victims into going to unsavory sites, but the terms of service do state that such abuse “will be reported to all ISPs involved and to the proper governmental agencies.”

Much more important for Webmasters and writers, however, is that TinyURLs introduce a single point of failure for what the site claims are “more than 8.5 million” URLs used in “over 185 million hits/month.” Although anyone can have broken links on a Web page, it would be unusual for all of the links to fail if they pointed to different Web sites. However, if all the links on a page were converted to TinyURLs and the TinyURL server went down or were permanently withdrawn, all of those links would be dead.

I do occasionally use TinyURLs to replace unwieldy URLs in my bibliographies, but I never put them on my Web site and when I do use them in a reference, I include bibliographic information that will allow readers to find the original article or Web page directly. Such precautions are in no way a criticism of the TinyURL folks, just a bit of prevention to avoid trouble.

I thank the organizers of TinyURL for a useful service and wish them a long and productive career.

I also hope they have really good business-continuity and disaster-recovery plans.

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