



Dow Jones & Reuters

Analysis: Blackout that's sweeping across the Northeast, Midwest and parts of Canada

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NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. Ira Flatow and SCIENCE FRIDAY are offline today. Their studio in New York was blacked out, but they will return next week.

Twenty-two hours after the lights winked off across much of the Northeast and parts of the Midwest and Canada, electricity is already back in some places. In many others, people are being told to expect power sooner rather than later. In a few places, though, it could be Sunday, maybe even Monday. Officials say they still don't know exactly why the blackout started. Investigations could take weeks. In a few minutes, we'll bring you the latest on what we do know, and we'll have experts on hand to answer your questions about how the electrical system, power system came to be this way and about what went right and what went wrong yesterday afternoon. We also want to hear your stories. How did you and your friends and your families cope on a dark and steamy night? Our telephone number is (800) 989-8255. That's (800) 989-TALK. If your computer's working, the e-mail address is totn@npr.org.

We'll go first, though, to New York City and NPR's own David Kestenbaum, who's in Midtown Manhattan. Hello, David.

DAVID KESTENBAUM (NPR News): Hi, Neal. How you doing?

CONAN: All right. More to the point, how are you doing and how is Midtown Manhattan doing?

KESTENBAUM: Fine. I'm wearing the same clothes I was yesterday. People seem to be, you know, getting along. We woke up on the Upper West Side today and there was electricity, and as you drove down towards, you know, the lights at some point, it stopped working, and there were still police directing traffic. And clearly, electricity was out in a large part of Midtown, and it appears to be back, at least where I'm standing right now, because the traffic lights are functioning again.

CONAN: Midtown is usually pretty crowded at this time on a Friday afternoon. What's it like now?

KESTENBAUM: It feels, you know, like a snow day, except it's very hot or something. People seem to be taking this as a free day. There's a lot of people sitting out in the parks rather than being cramped up in their little apartments. It's pretty mellow, you know, not a word you usually use with New York, but it's pretty laid-back.

CONAN: So people have just pretty much decided to make a long weekend of it?

KESTENBAUM: Yeah. I think that's the deal. I mean, some people, it was an involuntary long weekend. You know, people were trying to leave the city yesterday. One of the things I did this morning was I stopped into a bunch of hotels and the strangest place was the Waldorf-Astoria, where there was no power this morning, so it was like 10 in the morning and, you know, it's bright, sunny outside, and you walk inside and it takes your eyes a moment to adjust because it's so dark in there. And a woman led me with a flashlight back into the lobby, which is a huge cavernous lobby. And when your eyes adjust, you realize there are people sitting around you on very nice furniture, on very nice rugs, you know, and they're all reading the newspaper with little flashlights or candles. It was the strangest scene, and they apparently were booked up last night and are booked up tonight and, you know, they were escorting people up to their rooms and they served what food they had that hadn't spoiled. I mean, a lot of food is being thrown out here. I had a bagel this morning with cream cheese and I can't imagine that cream cheese was kept cold overnight.

CONAN: Well, last night, you drove up to New York from Washington, DC. What was that like?

KESTENBAUM: Shockingly, no traffic. Fastest trip I've ever had to New York. And then once we got in New York--I've never gotten around the city that quickly. There are no traffic lights, so there's really no reason to stop, although clearly, somebody has to stop at each intersection. But what was happening is that people would sort of get on the avenues, the big avenues that run north-south and decide that they had right-of-way and you could get uptown in about two minutes. You know, there were police with flares at every intersection, but traffic was moving really, really quickly. There are almost no cabs. Everyone was, you know, trying to flag a cab or had given up. But maybe they ran out of gas. We couldn't quite figure that out.

CONAN: Was there a sharp line of demarcation, a place where you could say, you know, here the lights were on and there they were off?

KESTENBAUM: Well, last night, they were just off everywhere. I mean, you could see who had generators. Some of the hotels had little generators, but they would use them just to--I think the Waldorf used it just for water--or that was the Hilton, actually. And they had gotten people up to their rooms also with glow-sticks. But you could see--I mean, part of the UN building was lit up. You could see the haves and the have-nots, you know. Some buildings had the occasional lights. But basically, as we were driving in, you know, you couldn't see the skyline. It was gone. You know, you couldn't see it.

CONAN: Our phone number again is (800) 989-8255. The e-mail address, totn@npr.org. And let's get a call. Bob is with us also in Manhattan in New York.

BOB (Caller): Yeah. I'd like to say something about the heroism of the blue-collar civil service of New York City, who hadn't been credited as much as they were 9/11, but an hour after this took place, there were 25 guys working in 130-degree temperatures in the subways under 72nd Street. And while a lot of people were partying, there were cops out in full gear who couldn't stop for a drink of water who were directing traffic and making things go. And the difference between working-class people who were noticing and bringing water and asking guys if they'd eaten and the people who were enjoying themselves--it was great that they were enjoying themselves, but they sort of took for granted the fact that an awful lot of people were working very hard to make sure that everybody else was safe.

CONAN: Was there a specific incident that you remember, Bob?

BOB: Yeah. I remember how hard it was for me to get water to bring to some of the guys who had just come out of the subway tunnel and were collapsed at the subway station, how there were some stores that were great. If I can name a hero, Fairway, which is a local institution, told the cops, 'Anything you want.' They gave them huge amounts of cold water. But there were an awful lot of people. You know, I laid out a lot of my own money just trying to buy water and juice and something for people who were lying down on the ground, passed out, were prostrate from having worked for hours trying to get people out of subway cars. And I think we all have to remember that it's great for college graduates and all of us intellectuals to talk about the adventure of it all, but our civilization is held together by blue-collar working-class union people who put in, day in/day out, heroism to make sure that the rest of us are safe.

CONAN: Bob, thanks very much.

BOB: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye.

David Kestenbaum still with us from Midtown Manhattan, and I wonder, last night, things like Bob was talking about--were you there to catch much of that incident, or by the time you got there, most of those crises seemed to have passed?

KESTENBAUM: Yeah. There were people putting up, you know, people in their rooms they didn't even know, you know, things like that. There were certainly lots of neighborhood acts of kindness and there were people sitting outside, you know, together even at 2 or 3 in the morning. But, you know, I have to say the novelty wore off pretty quickly, you know. You know that instinct you have when you walk in the house and reach for the light switch? You still do that and you forget what electricity does for you. There are so many things you can't do. One person said, you know, they were trying to get the news, and they realized the only way they could do it was to go down and start their car because they didn't have any battery-powered radios. But if they went and started their car, they could put on the radio and, therefore, hear something. You know, you just--and once you've had to walk up, you know, 20 flights of stairs carrying something heavy, you know, you really miss it pretty quickly.

CONAN: Some people are saying that--and Bob made reference to it, the events of 9/11. In some ways, do we think that, you know, both physically and mentally, that helped people prepare for this?

KESTENBAUM: Yeah. I mean, I overheard two people talking that clearly didn't know each other--and that's one of the things that happens in these situations--and one guy--he was saying, 'You know, I think we've got pretty good at this. I don't think we're going to have problems anymore, you know, with all these drills.'

CONAN: Let's go to another caller, another caller from Manhattan. Attara(ph) is on the line.

ATTARA (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Hi.

ATTARA: How you doing?

CONAN: I'm doing great. The point is, how are you doing?

ATTARA: We're actually heading out of town. We had a funny story because we actually weren't in Manhattan last night. We were at summer camp, which ended at 4:00, about 10 minutes before all the power went out. So we were pretty lucky that we weren't stuck with 300 youngsters, trying to provide for them in the dark overnight. It's an overnight camp.

CONAN: Whereabouts?

ATTARA: In the Bronx, Ft. Skyler, right over the Throgs Neck Bridge.

CONAN: So you just escaped what might have been a difficult situation.

ATTARA: Oh, it could have been a disaster. We had about 50 staff members still staying overnight, so it really--I know somebody was just talking about how, you know, the college graduates, intellectuals find it a party, you know, find it an experience, but really had that, because we had a, you know, guitar, we had kids sitting around, and we had a great barbecue with hot dogs and hamburgers. So we really did have a great adventure.

CONAN: And where are you heading now?

ATTARA: Washington, DC.

CONAN: Well, dress lightly.

ATTARA: I know.

CONAN: Thanks, Attara, and good like to you.

ATTARA: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye.

David Kestenbaum, it's as hot in New York today as it was yesterday and as it is all over the East Coast. Are people finding innovative ways to try to keep cool and cope with the weather with no place to escape from it?

KESTENBAUM: Well, I see people in the shade and no one seems to be out for a vigorous run or anything like that, but I think I heard just over the radio that the beaches were closed, which seems sort of unfortunate. We've all been kind of dreaming of a swim sitting around here.

CONAN: I also heard that the governor is opening the state parks for people who want to go there, free admission to the state parks. But any word on when the power is coming back? I gather it is back in some places.

KESTENBAUM: They've said in pieces. I'm now looking down 42nd Street and all the traffic lights seem to be functioning, so that's a good sign because it wasn't that way earlier.

CONAN: Well, David, thanks a lot and try to keep cool.

KESTENBAUM: OK. Take care, Neal.

CONAN: NPR's David Kestenbaum on the phone with us from Midtown Manhattan.

And joining us now from her car on Interstate I-75 between Detroit and Monroe, Michigan, is Bobbi Fuarri(ph). And welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

Ms. BOBBI FUARRI: Hello there.

CONAN: You live in Detroit but are on your way to Monroe. How come?

Ms. FUARRI: Yes. And I'm hoping that you don't lose me because we're having a difficult time. I'm trying to find a hotel where we can get some relief. My grandson has asthma, so he needs a breathing machine and treatment a couple of times a day, and we just thought that we could handle this, but it's becoming an adventure just getting to the hotel.

CONAN: Well, where were you when the power went out yesterday?

Ms. FUARRI: I was at work in downtown Detroit and was working on my computer when everything went out.

CONAN: Hmm. And was there any worry that--you know, a lot of people, the first thought was this was terrorism.

Ms. FUARRI: Well, at first, I wasn't that concerned until I started getting reports from my co-workers about places (technical difficulties) lost their power (technical difficulties) lost their power, and then there was a person who had heard that New York had lost their power and, of course, then the conversation went into, 'Is this a terrorist attack?' So very concerned.

CONAN: Now you live in northwest Detroit, as I understand it.

Ms. FUARRI: Yes. Yes.

CONAN: So if you were downtown, to get home, you had to drive through the city?

Ms. FUARRI: Yes, I did. And I have to say I was very proud of the citizens of Detroit. They were very cooperative. People (technical difficulties) start helping traffic move along, citizens were standing out trying to move traffic along, so it was (technical difficulties).

CONAN: Bobbi, I'm afraid your worst fears, at least regarding the cell phone, have come true. We're having a real hard time hearing you, but we're going to thank...

Ms. FUARRI: Oh, I'm sorry.

CONAN: We're going to thank you very much for your time and wish you the best of luck, and hope you can find a place to plug in that machine, certainly.

Ms. FUARRI: Yeah. (technical difficulties) the power's on in Detroit. Thank you.

CONAN: OK. Bobbi Fuarri is the director of community resources development at the New Center Community Mental Health Services in Detroit. And she joined us from the road between Detroit and Monroe, Michigan, where at least she hopes there is some electrical power.

Well, here with us in Studio 3A is NPR's Joe Palca. He's been covering the blackout all night and much of today. And, Joe, thanks for hanging in and being

with us.

JOE PALCA (NPR News): You're welcome.

CONAN: Have we had any news yet of explaining what happened yesterday?

PALCA: Well, it's actually sort of interesting. I was just looking at some of the information. We've had lots of news, and yet some of it is probably wrong. Overnight--I mean, this is one of these situations where it's very complicated, and everybody's going to try to come up with an answer as quickly as possible, and then they find that, for one reason or another, that answer isn't right and they have to sort of backtrack. So I brought down some-- apparently one of the best sources of information on this is the North American Electric Reliability Council. It was set up after the 1965 blackout that affected New York City and other parts of the Northeast. And they were supposed to bring together all the players who feed into the electric grid and figure out, you know, what could possibly be going wrong here.

So I've been following them, and at midnight last night, they put out a press release saying that the disturbance, as they call this thing, which is a nice euphemism, I suppose, was caused by the loss of several major transmission lines in the upper Midwestern United States. That's at midnight last night. This morning, that continued until about 11 AM, when the phrase changed to, 'We know that a number of transmission lines and generators tripped out of service prior to and during this event,' so they even backed off from what they were saying, and they're the ones that are supposed to know.

CONAN: Joe Palca will be back with more after a short break. We're talking about the blackout that swept across the Northeast and Midwest yesterday. How's it going where you live? (800) 989-8255.

I'm Neal Conan. It's TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

We're discussing the blackout that left people all over the Northeast and parts of the Midwest and parts of Canada without power. What happened where you live? Was it an adventure or an outrage? Our phone number is (800) 989-8255, (800) 989-TALK. And our e-mail address is totn@npr.org. Also, if you have informational questions about what happened and why, you can call that same number and send e-mail to that same address.

NPR science correspondent Joe Palca is here with us in Studio 3A. And what do we know now and not know about what caused the blackout?

PALCA: Well, I was just saying there's been some confusion about exactly what caused the blackout, and I think the point here is that there's going to be some uncertainty about exactly what happened. Neal, you might know that this event actually took place over nine seconds sometime after 4:00. A lot of things happened in that nine seconds to lose power to 50 million customers. And so it's going to take a while to reconstruct events. There is a lot of attention now being focused on something called the Lake Erie Loop. I think that's what they call it. Yeah, the Lake Erie Loop. It's a series of transmission lines around Lake Erie--that would be in Ohio and obviously into Canada as well--that carry power on part of the grid, which makes up the power supply to the northeast part of the country. There is some clear sense that a number of those power lines went off. Why did they go off? Not clear. Which ones were particularly to blame? Not clear. What were the triggering events and what happened to the power plants that came offline? In other words, what came first? I think there's a lot of critical timing questions that are going to have to be worked out.

But just to give everybody a little background of what we're talking about in a grid, a grid is the system by which you have electric power generators pouring into the system. You've got high-power transmission lines or electric transmission lines carrying the power around, and then you've got users taking power out of the grid. And any one of those things can cause an overload. And what is supposed to happen, and I guess did happen in some sense, is that when one part of the system goes out, the rest of the system is supposed to compensate. But somehow, it didn't compensate properly today. That's the main thing. But as the engineers like to say, the system wasn't destroyed by this event. They had to take things offline, but they're able to put things back online. That's why people are getting their power back, instead of saying, 'You know, we're cooked here. We don't know what to do.'

CONAN: But they have to do it every cautiously...

PALCA: That's right.

CONAN: ...to make sure that it doesn't trip out again.

PALCA: That's right. Because if a system is unstable and you put a power source into it, that can just make it more unstable and have the automatic features that caused it to shut off in the first place cause it to shut off again.

CONAN: Let's get another phone call. Dorothea(ph) is with us from Brooklyn, New York.

DOROTHEA (Caller): Yes. Hi.

CONAN: Hi.

DOROTHEA: I would like to first thing take the comment and thank Mr. Mayor Bloomberg for recognizing that our people are working together. And I live in a 17-story building in Brooklyn, and at this time, we're coming together, we're helping the elderly to get up to their steps and we're helping the other people in the building, you know, to get to their destination by using flashlights and looking out for one another. But I can thank God that we have come together in agreement to do these things, even in the street, with the traffic lights out. I have no water in this building. We have nothing. What are we to do from this point?

CONAN: Is there no power at all in your neighborhood?

DOROTHEA: We have no power, no water. I have a pregnant daughter that's here that's about to have a baby, and I'm on the 10th floor. There's people that's up on 17, and the building and the hallways is pitch black.

CONAN: Is...

DOROTHEA: OK? And when you leave out of these buildings, it's not a safe zone, because at night, about 11:30, 12:00 last night, you hear gunfire. The people are shooting up. I would like the public to know that even though that we are doing well, let's keep prayer.

CONAN: It...

DOROTHEA: We need to pray.

CONAN: Is this one of those buildings where you can't open the windows?

DOROTHEA: We opened the windows, yes, but, you know, the windows, by the sunlight and the moon--thank God for the moon because it comes through and it shines the light in, but it's still not enough light. It's not a safe place. And when you leaving out in the hallways, the hallways is completely black. There is no lights in this building.

CONAN: Well, Dorothea, you've not gotten any word on when you might expect power back?

DOROTHEA: No. They're not saying anything about it. All I keep hearing is that Brooklyn have lights. I'm in Brooklyn. I have no lights. I have no water. There's nothing running. There is no lights. I'm living off a generator, which is--actually, you know, the radios that came out back in the days where you wind it up?

CONAN: Sure.

DOROTHEA: I have a wind-up radio, and I also have the tap lights that's keeping me going and a couple of flashlights. I don't even trust the candles because we already had about two fires in the building with this problem.

CONAN: That's a very dangerous thing, you're right, those candles.

DOROTHEA: Yes.

CONAN: Well, Dorothea, thank you for your efforts to help your neighbors.

DOROTHEA: OK. And I thank you for taking the time to letting us state our opinions.

CONAN: OK. Thanks very much.

DOROTHEA: Bye-bye.

CONAN: Joe Palca, your sister lives in Brooklyn. What's happening with her?

PALCA: Well, that's right. I was just listening to the caller and thinking that I talked to my sister, who has a bakery down in--well, it's an area by the river or by the bay, I guess. I'm not sure what you call it there. And early this morning, she was bereft because all her belongings in the freezers and what have you were beginning to warm up, and she was very concerned. But I talked to her about a half an hour ago, and the power was back on and she was back in business making cakes and such. So, you know, it varies from place to place, and I think that's the point Dorothea--the last caller--I'm sorry...

CONAN: Dorothea, yeah.

PALCA: Dorothea, got the name right. She's right that there's no--it's not easy to tell what's going to happen for a particular individual, because the pattern by which you bring the power back on is mysterious to us mere mortals. There's some, obviously, rationale by where the company thinks they

want to bring on the pieces that they're most confident about to begin with. And if she's in an old building and the infrastructure of the electrical structure in her neighborhood is old, they may say, 'Ooh, we want to bring on power elsewhere before we try it in this somewhat older, more antiquated section.' I don't know, of course, exactly where she lives, but that's the kind of issue that has to be considered.

CONAN: Well, joining us now is somebody who may be able to help us answer some of these questions anyway. **Robert McCullough** can talk about all things electric, from its history to its current usage across the country. He's the managing partner of McCullough Research, a consulting firm in **Portland, Oregon**.

And welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

Professor **ROBERT McCULLOUGH** (McCullough Research): Thank you.

CONAN: How long do you think it's going to take to figure out the cause of this blackout?

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Well, we've been here before. In 1965, we had a blackout about half this size that affected the same states and provinces. In that case, Congress and the Federal Power Commission, what's now called FERC, took several months to get to the bottom of it. This is not the sort of situation where you can get on the Web and find an answer. Someone has to walk through each piece of equipment in each utility. The timing is critical. The sheer complexity of it is unbelievable. Unlike the rest of the world, we have integrated the electric system from Saskatchewan to Florida, from New Orleans to Montreal, so it's a big machine.

CONAN: Well, there's an e-mail question exactly to that point from William Babcock in North Little Rock, Arkansas. He asks, 'Why would a failure in one city take down the other cities? Don't they get their power from a local power provider? I'm just glad the power's still going on strong here and the AC is still running strong.'

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Well, there are a couple different issues there. The first one is we always want to use the cheapest power plants, and if the cheapest power plants are in Canada, then it's in everyone's interest to dispatch those. The second issue is the electrons. These are the same things that you studied in high school. They're moving at the speed of light. They don't talk to us. They have their own logic, their own physics, and we actually get the system working by planning ahead. The electric system is more like a football play. You spent weeks or months puzzling it out, getting the right answers. Then when the play is called, pretty much the players move on their own. You don't get to quarterback them. So when we have a crisis, a huge failure, that's happening far quicker than any human can intervene. When NERC said nine seconds, they probably weren't kidding. You can move electricity from one end of North America to the other in a fraction of a second.

CONAN: Well, it is--as everybody who certainly experienced the last day without power will understand, it's been a warm day. Was using too much power a cause of this potentially?

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Not at all. We've already checked all of that. Yesterday was about 28,000 megawatts in the New York area. A peak for New York is 30,000, so we were nowhere near the limit. This isn't a problem of use. It's probably not a problem of single equipment failure either. It will turn out to be a public policy issue. And I'm trying to find metaphors. When you teach college students, you're usually trying to find something that fits into their life.

When you are preparing that brilliant meal with 14 different features and you've planned it all out and it's in the stove and something fails, you don't usually end up saying, 'Hm, I probably bought the wrong eggs.' You usually end up saying, 'Gee, I didn't plan that together so I could handle all the different things that could have gone wrong. I had a timing problem here, or the sauce wasn't ready.' So it was a question of planning ahead.

CONAN: Well...

Prof. McCULLOUGH: When we set up these systems, we have special contingencies in place for almost every possible equipment failure. So it's probably in the long run the same thing we found in 1965, that we didn't do a good enough job planning for possible emergencies.

CONAN: Well, as you undoubtedly know, many of us do not understand electricity and how it works, and certainly not the grid. Public policy, though, we do understand. Politics is right up our alley. Is there somebody who's going to get blamed for this?

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Well, there is a huge policy debate, and this goes right to the center of it. As you remember in the last couple of years there's been a lot of outrage about the events in California.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Prof. McCULLOUGH: And these came from a proposal forwarded by a variety of folks, including Enron, to centralize the system, to make it more efficient. In New York state, we've moved the center of the system to Schenectady. In the old days there would have been a utility in each area that was responsible for the local area. Today it's an agency called the New York Independent System Operator. And sitting in Congress right now is a new **energy** bill and a central part of that is whether we're going to proceed with that centralization.

Some parts of the country oppose it vociferously. Those of us on the West Coast tend to doubt it. We like the fact there's a pilot flying our airplane. Even if the guys in the control center are smarter than our pilot, we're awful happy to have him. And an example of this is, though we had a major failure in New York, New England and Ontario, a small area of Ontario did not have a failure, and that's because a local official, spotting what was happening, islanded their system in time to avoid the crisis.

So this is going to be an interesting impact on a massive political debate. The proponents of centralization, interestingly enough, call it deregulation. The proponents of keeping the system as it is and proceeding very slowly call that decentralization. So finding the labels is a bit tricky. But the fundamental is the following: We had one system, very complex, administered in a very few locations, and a cascade of failures. And the fingers are certainly going to be pointed at those new institutions, such as the New York ISO, that have a central role in all of this.

CONAN: Let's get another caller. This is Marcia, who joins us on the line from Canarsie, which is a neighborhood in Brooklyn.

MARCIA (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Hi.

MARCIA: I just wanted to share our little story here. The power went out, of course, yesterday afternoon and our phones went dead all of a sudden. And also our cell phones went dead. And so my brother figured out that if we--we had some old phones, corded phones, downstairs.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

MARCIA: Our cordless phones were useless because they all required some sort of an electric input.

CONAN: Yeah.

MARCIA: And so it was the old-school like phones that we've had 10 years ago stashed away in the basement that we were able to plug in and get phone service. So...

CONAN: The old dial phone.

MARCIA: Yeah, the old dial phones. And so it was just kind of funny that we've become so reliant on new technology, but it's the old stuff that we were able to rely on.

CONAN: I...

MARCIA: Also, cash. You know, I rarely walk around with cash anymore, and I realized we had no cash. I just had my debit card, and we just had to scrounge together a couple dollars to buy candles. So it was just really funny, just a lesson on kind of old-school...

CONAN: Old technology.

MARCIA: Right, really saving the day.

CONAN: Well, Marcia, thanks very much for sharing that with us.

MARCIA: Oh, no problem.

CONAN: We're talking about the blackout.

You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And here's an e-mail that we've gotten, this from Michael Smith, an IBM technician, he says. 'I live in Akron, Ohio, which was heavily affected. However, where I live there was a two-block island that had power while all around me was dark. It was a guilty pleasure having TV and air conditioning while neighbors had to barbecue to have their meals, and resort to flashlights and candles.'

Well, there is another place which had a similar experience, though on a somewhat larger scale. Joining us now from his fully lit and electrically humming office in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, is Mayor Don Robart.

And, Mayor Robart, good of you to join us.

Mayor DON ROBART (Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio): Good afternoon, Neal.

CONAN: So how come the lights are working where you are?

Mayor ROBART: Well, we're not sure, Neal. It's been alleged because we have public power, and indeed we do. But at this point it's a little preliminary for us to actually try to pinpoint if that was the prevailing issue or not. We do know that we were a little ahead of the game yesterday because we anticipated our power dropping and we put in a call to our distributor, and at that point it seemed to bottom out and start to go back up again. Whether that was the conduit or not, we're not quite sure. And we've been calling our distributor, and they're still in the throes of trying to get a lot of people up. So they haven't been as responsive as they probably would like to be. But whether it was a public power issue or not, we're not quite sure.

But it was certainly gratifying for us to be able to--I drove down into the major city in our area, Akron, and they were for the most part out. And it was nice to come back and see our--it was almost like when you land in Las Vegas and you see all the lights, you know, it was just glorious.

CONAN: So Cuyahoga Falls is not part of the same grid?

Mayor ROBART: Well, apparently not. Apparently not, although, as I said, Akron is just to our south so, you know, you'd think it would be on the same one. But I'm like the rest of the mayors, I'm not sure how that all works. But I only know that three weeks ago I was a goat because it rained like crazy and we had tremendous drowning and flooding and the rest, and I didn't have anything to do with that. And last night I was the hero because we had electricity, and I probably had very little to do with that either.

CONAN: So you're calling a snap election for tomorrow.

Mayor ROBART: Exactly. Exactly.

CONAN: Have you had any requests for help from other places?

Mayor ROBART: We have indeed, Neal. Actually Cleveland is probably worse off than anyone in the district because their power supplies their pumps to their water. So they are indeed out of water, and we have been vigorously providing water up into some of the Cleveland suburbs, as are some other communities as well. And we understand their plight and we're going to do everything we can to help them.

CONAN: Well, thanks very much, and good luck to you.

Mayor ROBART: Thank you.

CONAN: Mayor Don Robart of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, where the lights never did go out last night.

And we just have about a minute or so left in this segment, **Robert McCullough**, but can you explain why some parts didn't go out when so many other places did?

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Yes. Ohio has a public power system where the individual public power utilities have their own control areas. They operate on their own. And the mayor should look up the operating engineer last night who did the right decision and islanded his town away from the surrounding and back to their own utility, AEP. Somebody actually should get a bonus for that.

CONAN: Well, if he identifies the guy, he might run against him for mayor the next time around. So maybe he just wants to keep it a secret.

We're talking about the blackout that left people all over the Northeast, the Midwest and parts of Canada without power. And we're taking your calls, (800) 989-8255; (800) 989-TALK. Again, if your computer is working, you can send us e-mail at totn@npr.org.

When we come back from a short break, how the blackout is affecting transportation.

I'm Neal Conan. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Announcements)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. We're talking about the big blackout. To join the conversation, give us a phone call: (800) 989-8255; (800) 989-TALK. And the e-mail address is totn@npr.org.

And if you were expecting to tune in to hear Ira Flatow and "Science Friday," well, they're produced out of New York and they are blacked out today. They'll be back next week.

Our guests are: With us in the studio, Joe Palca. He's NPR's science correspondent. With us from **Portland**, Oregon, is **Robert McCullough**, who's an adjunct professor at **Portland** State University.

And I wanted to begin with a couple of e-mails that are sort of on the same point. Chuck James in Wilmington, Delaware, wrote, 'In defense of the system, please keep in mind that these large crises happen rarely. You keep referring to '77 and '65. Not many countries can claim such a record of reliability. Some people inside the industry contend that the system is too reliable. Every time the power company wants more money, people say, "What for? The lights work all the time as it is." They might get the funding to upgrade the infrastructure more readily if the lights went out more often.' I'm not so sure about that.

But anyway, here's another, related question from Russ Pichette(ph) in Fall River, Massachusetts. 'Is this an American phenomenon or have there been similar incidents in other industrialized nations, i.e. Western Europe, Japan, etc.?'

And, **Robert McCullough**, what about it?

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Absolutely. There have been similar incidents elsewhere. The US and Canada are generally the leaders in this technology. As you remember, a certain Tom Edison invented it back at the turn of the century.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Prof. McCULLOUGH: The question whether it's reliable enough, I think the answer is that this is one of the things where we can't accept any level of failure. There are hospitals that are operating on emergency power. There are airlines that are shut down. Air Canada has had to close its entire worldwide operations. So we maintain that the system should, in fact, be 100 percent stable. And that's the world we plan for.

Something like what happened yesterday is a black eye, and there will be an immense amount of effort trying to figure out what went wrong. According to our system, the equipment that failed should have islanded out immediately; we should have been able to restrict the failures to one specific geographic area. If it was, as NERC suspects, northern Michigan or northern Ohio, that should have been where the problem was and it should not have shown up in

New York City.

CONAN: A question from maybe a neighbor of yours in **Portland**. Daniel writes to ask, 'I wonder if electrical utility deregulation created the climate where it was more profitable to generate and trade power than maintain the transmission and distribution system, and to what extent deregulation may have contributed to the blackout.'

Prof. McCULLOUGH: That's a concern we have, and as I said, that will be a central policy issue investigated. The problem has to do with something that we call tragedy of the commons. Equipment that's owned by everyone doesn't have someone really in charge of it. Equipment that's owned by you is something you pay a lot of attention for. We've moved the New York system from the local utilities to Schenectady.

And the question is: Are the people in charge of Schenectady--that's a stakeholder board, it includes many of the parties that we worried about in the California **energy** manipulation--are there issues there that would have affected their attention to reliability? And obviously there's a question any time you centralize whether or not a local party would have been more responsive to that reliability issue than a statewide or regional party.

Federal **Energy** Regulatory Commission has proposed--they're now backing off of this--to have one operator for the entire East Coast.

CONAN: Hm.

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Obviously, that's a change that is going to require a lot of careful thought, especially in the light of this current blackout.

CONAN: The blackout continues to affect transportation. **Robert McCullough** just mentioned Air Canada. In the Northeast and in the rest of the country, airlines are struggling to resume flights. Rail service in the Northeast corridor is delayed as well.

NPR's John Ydstie is with us here in Studio 3A.

And it's always good to have you on the program, John.

JOHN YDSTIE reporting:

Thank you, Neal. Good to be here.

CONAN: Where do things stand right now in terms of the airlines and the airports?

YDSTIE: Well, let's talk first about the three major New York airports. Only Newark has full power. La Guardia and JFK are operating on auxiliary power. So that means lots of flights canceled, no power in those two airports for ticketing or security devices. And I'm hearing that there are actually no flights currently into or out of La Guardia. So we have long lines of people standing in front of the terminal very unhappy.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

YDSTIE: Here are some numbers: American Airlines canceled almost 200 flights today. US Airways, all flights out of La Guardia canceled. Air Canada, as

was said, has grounded all its planes until late this afternoon because of problems; no power at their operations center.

CONAN: What about Detroit, Cleveland, Ottawa?

YDSTIE: Well, Detroit, no power at the main terminal. There's some auxiliary power at the big Northwest terminal there. And so they're getting some flights out of there. Cleveland's got full power and things are pretty normal there, but normal only to the extent that, you know, they could fly out but they can't get flights into all these major airports that they need to fly to. Toronto has full power as well. Ottawa has had full power sometimes, and blackouts other times. They're having rolling blackouts there. I don't know why they don't exclude the airport from that, but they don't.

CONAN: And obviously, as you mentioned, a lot of people are stranded at these places, presumably exchanging their degree of happiness with the employees.

YDSTIE: Yeah, I'm sure they are.

CONAN: Yeah.

YDSTIE: Thousands of people. And, you know, thousands of people have spent the night in these airports. So they're very unhappy by now. And it's not just people in the Northeast area and these Midwest airports that are stranded. There are people who were going to fly into these airports on the West Coast and elsewhere, even as far away as Europe, who haven't been able to get on their flights.

CONAN: If you had a trip planned, what should you do this weekend?

YDSTIE: Well, the airlines are saying if you can, consider delaying your trip. They say they will allow you to change your--the major airlines say they'll allow you to change your tickets without penalty throughout the weekend. In any case, if you're planning to fly, check the Web site to make sure your flight is on, or call the airline before you go to the airport.

CONAN: Most people, or a lot of people will be trying to drive, too. What about the roadways?

YDSTIE: Well, the roadways into and out of New York City, which have been a problem, are open. You can get back and forth to Manhattan on...

CONAN: So bridges and tunnels are no problem.

YDSTIE: The bridges and tunnels, no problem. Still no--the street lights in New York are not working. There is bus service in New York. In fact, it's air-conditioned bus service, so if your air conditioning is out, you might want to just go take a bus ride. But in terms of other transportation in New York, the subway is still down in New York City. Commuter rail's severely disrupted. And trains between cities in the Northeast corridor are a problem, too. No service between New York, Boston, New Haven and Providence. But there is Amtrak service between Washington and New York.

CONAN: Any idea when this is all going to be able to return to normal?

YDSTIE: Well, it could take the weekend before the airlines get to normal. In fact, they're hoping to get back to normal by Monday morning. Rails, as well. Mayor Bloomberg suggested maybe no subway service until tomorrow.

CONAN: OK. NPR's John Ydstie with us here in Studio 3A. Thanks very much.

YDSTIE: You're welcome.

CONAN: Let's go to another phone call. And Josh is with us from Manhattan.

JOSH (Caller): Yes, hello.

CONAN: Hi.

JOSH: Hi. Just having a great time listening to the radio here and just sort of listening to everyone's comments from around different parts of the state and the city as well.

CONAN: Mm. What have you been doing?

JOSH: Well, I'm sitting in my shorts in my apartment sweating right now, to be quite honest with you, and I live right below Times Square, and I know that there is power above me. Apparently someone said there's power below us here. But not on my block. So...

CONAN: People in Manhattan, you should understand, if you live north of somebody, you think they're above you, and if you live south of somebody, you think they're below you.

JOSH: Yeah, definitely said with a sort of Manhattan frame of mind.

CONAN: Yes, indeed.

JOSH: But yeah, I just called because I thought--I had such an amazing night last night. I was fortunate enough to bring my bicycle out at about 4:30, about 15 minutes after the power went out, and rode down to a friend's barbecue birthday party, and from there just sort of toured the city last night with various people who just sort of came and went out of this organic bike mass, and got to just see so many amazing sights of people just sort of celebrating and just surrendering to the moment.

CONAN: Sort of a bicycle flash mob, if you will.

JOSH: Yeah, something like that. I mean, it was as if we were in the Tour de France at moments...

CONAN: Huh.

JOSH: ...people wildly cheering us on, flashlights waving, saluting, hollering, honking; the chiming of our bells as we, you know, toured different streets. We went from Union Square to Washington Square Park down to Thompson Square Park, which is in the Lower East Side. Each of them having their sort of own kind of like bacchanalian festival happening. Very impromptu, and it was really quite magical. And then all the way up to Times Square to FOX News to watch some stuff on the monitors because we knew there would be some news coverage up there because they've got generators; we don't.

CONAN: It sounds like it was an exhilarating experience.

JOSH: It really was. And I'll just say this, that coming down Broadway and seeing Times Square completely black like a dim arcade game, like some dusty pinball machine, with tourists sort of just, like, loitering on the streets, it was really magical.

CONAN: Well, Josh, thank you very much, and do your best to keep cool.

JOSH: Oh, yeah. I'm headed to the Hamptons right now.

CONAN: Have a great weekend.

JOSH: Thanks a lot.

CONAN: And I'd like to thank our guests. Joe Palca was with us here in Studio 3A.

Thanks very much.

PALCA: You bet.

CONAN: And **Robert McCullough**, the managing partner of McCullough Research, a consulting firm, and an adjunct professor at **Portland State University**.

We appreciate your taking the time out to help us understand at least a little bit about how the electrical grid system works.

Prof. McCULLOUGH: Thank you. We'll have a report out on this on Monday at www.mresearch.com.

CONAN: You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Those of us in the Northeast over the age of 40 or so can now count three blackout episodes. Though all very different, they share an experiential quality. The loss of power reduced each of our worlds to our immediate surroundings, at least for a while. And we all tell vivid stories, the same, but different.

In 1965 I was away at school in northern Connecticut. The kids all cheered when the emergency generator followed the Northeast grid down the tubes. It was an unexpected holiday and the postponement of a dreaded algebra test seemed like a reprieve from the governor. If memory serves, I was no better prepared when classes resumed and blue books were handed out, but the thrill of even momentary escape is indelible.

The concentration of media and population made the country a lot more Northeast-centric then, so 'Where were you when the lights went out?' sounded like a national question. And we all winked along with Johnny Carson's jokes about the baby boomlet we all expected nine months later.

Twelve years afterwards, most people had similarly genial adventures, but the blackout of 1977 was remembered for scattered but sometimes intense violence. I was a young reporter living in New York City then, and walked a couple of blocks from my apartment to go watch some of my neighbors loot the

local stores.

(Soundbite of 1977 report)

Unidentified Police Officer: If anybody's in there, come on out with your hands up.

CONAN: Well, we're just watching now someone being arrested who was in the Radio Clinic. Well, obviously, people were stealing stuff from in there.

Unidentified Man: Yeah, they were.

CONAN: What were they getting?

Unidentified Man: TVs.

CONAN: Because I saw a bunch of people walking down the street with air conditioners.

Unidentified Man: Well, I seen that man, the one they got up against the wall...

CONAN: Yeah.

Unidentified Man: ...by the neck. He went to tell them something, now they arresting him.

CONAN: Which guy? The short guy or the tall guy?

Unidentified Man: The Spanish dude. The Spanish dude.

CONAN: Spanish dude? Yeah.

(Soundbite of street noise)

CONAN: Again, scenes like that were the exception. Most people's memories are of volunteers directing traffic with flashlights and pitching in to help each other out. Maybe my most vivid memory was of the following afternoon. Then, as now, power returned sporadically. NPR's New York bureau was still dark, though I had to prepare my story at a studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The only way to feed the report to Washington was on a battery-operated tape recorder at the bureau across town. Racing to make the deadline, I grabbed a cab on Broadway. But as we wove through Times Square, the cabbie shouted that it was illegal to turn left on 42nd Street. 'Will 20 bucks change your mind?' I asked, and he snatched the bill out of my out-thrust hand as we turned east. I always wanted to do that.

This time, for whatever reason, it seems a lot more like an unscheduled three-day weekend than a crisis. Twenty-three hours later we still don't know when the power will be back, but sooner rather than later seems reasonable, in most places anyway. We don't know why it happened and probably won't for some time to come. And those of us who did not attend Caltech probably won't understand it anyway.

My theory is that the Northeast doesn't dominate the media and the culture in quite the same way anymore, and it just couldn't understand all the attention devoted this month to California.

Ira Flatow and "Science Friday" will be back next Friday.

In Washington, I'm Neal Conan, NPR News.

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