

Me and Computer Technology

Technology. It shapes our lives. It has a big impact on our everyday activities. It has the potential to make each of us more productive and successful. I don't think I like it. After all, to err is human but to really foul things up you need a computer.

Have you ever noticed how older people surround themselves with old things? Things like 1987 Buicks, Melmac dishes, and wind up alarm clocks? I used to think that it was because they couldn't afford newer things or perhaps were becoming unreasonably frugal in their retirement years. I now realize that is their way of retaining a measure of control in this technology mad world.

Have you noticed that virtually every machine now comes with a computer screen? Service station gas pump - computer screen. Parking lot pay station - computer screen. Safeway grocery self check out - computer screen. Bank ATM - computer screen. Last month I took my car to a mechanic because the dashboard engine service light was flashing yellow. He used a hand held engine diagnostic device to determine the problem. I now spend many winter evenings shivering in the cold because I am afraid to touch our home heating thermostat which is about as easy to program as a Japanese nuclear reactor. I rented a car in Kelowna last summer and almost perished from the heat because I couldn't figure out how to turn on the air conditioning on the dashboard computer screen. I feel overwhelmed by a relentless advancing computer technology that is slowly making me feel very obsolete. I am slowly coming to terms with the fact that I am a button, knob and dial type guy trapped in a color CRT world.

This Christmas, my wife gave me an Apple I-pad. I think that she had misgivings but our daughter persuaded her that I was more technology hip than popularly perceived within our family (which just goes to show that daughters often give their fathers way more I.Q. credit than is actually deserved). I am mostly using my new I-pad to hold my book open although I am quite taken with it's Google Earth feature which allows me to tour such exotic places as Istanbul, Turkey; Paris, France; or

Eyebrow, Saskatchewan without ever having to get out of my chair.

I have thought long and hard about why I have such a hang up about computers and computer screens. I have come up with 4 factors underlying my dislike of computer technology.

Factor 1- Screen exposure.

I have vivid memories of my father grabbing me by my 5 year old shoulders and pulling me back from our home RCA black & white television set just as Lassie was telling Grandpa that Timmy had fallen down the well. My father was the senior technician at CBWT television in Winnipeg and always warned me that being too close to the television screen was bad. He didn't ever say why it was bad but here I am, 60 years later, with coke bottle bottom eye glasses typing this article about 6 inches from my computer screen

Factor 2 – Decision making

All these computer screen devices demand that you make instant and possibly fateful decisions. For example, when buying gas for your automobile, you not only have to decide what octane level you want but also whether you want a car wash, your spending limit and whether you want a receipt. All the questions are only of a “yes’ or “no” variety with no “maybe” button. Also, you usually have to make these decisions instantly as there is always some guy in a giant pick up truck behind you wanting quick access to your gas pump. Oh the pressure. It can't be good for you.

Factor 3 – Bad memories

My first exposure to computers came in 1970 when I was taking my undergraduate degree in Administration at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina campus. Computer Programming 101 was held in a huge lecture hall with about 15 math students sitting at the front and about 30 card playing administration students sitting at the back. I never really understood anything that the professor was talking about, let alone binary math or the Fortran IV programming language. Luckily, most of the

assignments were group one's and I had some very smart classmates who let me put my name on the group assignment as long as I proof read the final assignment report and fetched the sandwiches, potato chips and beer. To this day, anything to do with computers still brings back that horrible feeling of inadequacy and an urge to run out and buy a bag of barbecue potato chips.

Factor 4 - Unintended consequences

As you have probably gathered by now, my understanding of computers and computer technology is pretty limited. I have to confess that I don't really know how the internet works or how it is possible to use your portable communication device to send or receive data even when you are sitting in the middle of nowhere with not an electrical outlet or cable in sight. I don't really understand such terms as 'server', 'cloud', or 'cyber attack'. As a result, I am sorely afraid that some day I will push the wrong button, send a message to the wrong person or incorrectly pay my on line Telus bill resulting in the launching of Russian ICBMs, the crash of the stock market or a sternly worded letter from the Canadian Security Intelligence service.

So there you have it. Like a grasshopper trapped in the bug screen of the family car, I am moving rapidly forward into our new world of computer technology even though I am not really enjoying the experience. Now I need to remember how to save this article and forward it to our editor. On the other hand, if I really crew up and launch those Russian ICBMs, it really won't matter will it?