

Up Front/Commentary:

Whenever technology wins, people lose

By Kathy Hedberg of the Tribune

One morning last week I turned on my computer and at first everything looked fine, but within a few minutes I could tell it wasn't.

My mouse wouldn't work. And then the computer, which has been suffering lately from some form of narcolepsy, konked out and I couldn't revive it.

So I called the computer guy and he came right over. I think he has me tagged on his caller ID read-out as "high-maintenance customer" because whenever I call it's like a summons for an ambulance.

"HELP ME. I CAN'T GET THIS DARNED COMPUTER TO WORK AND ALL MY STORIES ARE STUCK AND I NEED TO CHECK MY EMAIL," I screech in that panic-stricken tone I use whenever an inconvenience strikes.

Naturally, as soon as the problem is solved, which normally doesn't take too long or cause too much difficulty, at least for the computer guy, I feel kind of foolish for overreacting the way I do. I always feel foolish for overreacting, although that never stops me from overreacting the next time something goes wrong. Overreacting is just one of the things I do best.

But I will say this in my defense: I never used to behave this way when I used a plain old typewriter and paper. I almost always could solve a typewriter problem and if I couldn't and the typewriter was out of commission for awhile at least I could still use my phone, check my mail that came in the mailbox and have access to all the other work I'd done days before.

In other words, my typewriter never held me hostage the way my computer does. I went into this computer age reluctantly for this very reason. People who were self-reliant and competent in many skills suddenly were doing everything on their computers - storing all their files and personal information, using them for resources, making connections, creating ideas, paying bills. We were encouraged to do this to make transactions faster, save on paper and preserve trees. All of these savings, of course, resulted in people losing their jobs, but, hey, with a little computer-based job-retraining program those folks could find other work, like opening up an espresso stand or learning to be a computer repair guy.

Now, of course, even computers are almost obsolete. People do all their business and make all their plans on these little hand-held devices they used to call cell phones but now they call personal assistants. There goes another job.

If someone evil wanted to completely upend society, all he'd have to do is figure out how to infect all these computers and personal assistants with some kind of virus or personality disorder. Life as we know it would come to a screeching halt. The more dependent we become on technology, the easier we make it for al-Qaida or the communists to move in and take over the world, as they've been threatening to do for years.

All we can hope is they're having as much trouble with their technology as we are having with ours.

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