

Bill Hall: The machines will always win

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Machines that have possessed the last three generations of humans will never let us go. Horses we could handle. But not two dominant machines.

I speak of the automobile and of the computer. With each generation they control us more.

It began with my father's generation. In the '30s, he was drawn toward his first car. In those years, cars and professional mechanics were still few. A large percentage of the first car owners were farmers. If a car malfunctioned and stopped, as they frequently did, the car could not fix itself, just as most horses couldn't cure themselves.

If a car stopped running or broke an axle or blew a tire, the owner was his own mechanic and tire patcher.

That wasn't so horrible at the time. You didn't have to be a genius to take an engine apart and put it back together. Fixing a car was worth it in those early years when it was dedicated mostly to displaying your speedy new machine to jealous spectators along rural roads and city streets.

The wizards of the car factories back then kept adding improvements to the automobile - headlights, roofs, heaters, brakes that worked, even radios playing Big Crosby hits - and cup holders, of course. A person can't drive without cup holders.

Fortunately, there were no smart phones then, nor any drivers stupid enough to be texting.

As the years went by, cars acquired extraordinary advancements that included little computers keeping the car humming. Cars became so sophisticated that normal people had their hands full if they tried to fix a car.

Even commercial mechanics struggled with complicated modern cars. Today, few among us can cure a sick automobile. One day we awoke and realized we were at the mercy of modern cars. And now, self-driving cars are on the horizon. (It's time to scream.)

The best we could hope for today is that we know how to turn a key or push a button and listen to the engine sing. That has become the sorry extent of our meager knowledge of how to start a car. Now we are indentured servants of the machines that own our souls.

But it gets worse. One day in 1984, Sharon and I recognized the worth of a magic machine called a computer. Computers remind me of the farmers who were early in embracing the automobile.

I have spent half my life using computers to express myself and to share these yarns with you. At first, after feeling stupid for forgetting to plug in the computer, I quickly learned how to use the device most of the time.

Computers are a godsend for people who type for a living - writers, secretaries, scholars, business people, even texting if you are dumb enough to type while driving. In fact, a computer is to a writer or a secretary the equivalent of a tractor for a horse farmer. It is like a power saw or a nail gun for a carpenter.

Best of all, in my racket, a computer is like an electronic committee of wise people who sit there with me finding countless nuggets of knowledge. Virtually everything you need to know in any line of work or play is at your fingertips.

In the early years of computers, I got better at learning how they operate. I learned enough to operate my computer most of the time.

On occasion, when I lost my way, I would have to call an expert. I learned to tell the expert "I think you should know that, on a scale of 10 of computer knowledge, I am about a four."

That worked. That let the expert know I wasn't totally stupid but it was in his own interest to explain things simply to me and without jargon. But now I am back at zero.

Just as automobiles eventually took charge of us, we now have a world of dominant computers that stifle the minds of normal people. Computers and jargon-spouting techies now rule our lives and our bruised brains.

So I say to you, my fellow victims of complicated machines, forget your silly paranoia about Kenyans in the White House, huge meteors in the sky and half-baked politicians to the left and to the right.

Get in your car, hope that it will start and head for the hills where we will all gather, sob a little and hide from the machines.

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