



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CONFESSIONS OF A TECHNOLOGICALLY DISABLED PERSON

As much as it pains me to admit it, I am a technologically disabled person. Most new high technology, hard or soft, engenders in me seeds of phobic paranoia. It has always been so, and my constant prayer has been for a government-funded project for the technologically disabled to correct the limitations of my early education.

Born in the deep, rural South my early encounters with technology were quite limited. My first experience was not with a gas stove; my mother cooked on a wood stove heated by the wood I chopped, and it was not difficult to figure out how that system worked. My first experience was not with electricity; we first had that when I was twelve. The kerosene lamps we used held little mystery for me. Neither was my first experience with television watching "Howdy-Doody Time." I saw my first television on an F.F.A. trip to the Florida State Fair in Tampa when I was seventeen. My first experience was not with the marvels of indoor plumbing; I understood everything I wanted to know about the outside facility we used. Everyone had a two-holer, and you could sit with your brother in that cordial environment all morning plumbing the really important mysteries of life. Our advanced technology has taken us to a one-holer, where we contemplate life alone--I wonder, sometimes, if the move from a two-holer to a one-holer is an indication of the dehumanizing effects that can accompany advances in technology?

My first experience was not with these advanced technologies; we really were in the deep, rural South. My first experience came, as most exciting experiences come in the South, on a Saturday night. For on Saturday night when I was seven years old, we walked across Polliwog Creek to my Grandfather's house to listen to the Grand Ole Opry on my Grandfather's pride and joy--a Philco battery-operated radio. I was never allowed to touch it and was not really sure I wanted to. It was an awesome thing to me, and I could not figure out how they got Grandpa Jones, Minnie Pearl, and Ernest Tubb in that big brown box. I could hear Ernest Tubb stretching each syllable lower and lower when he sang "I'm Walking the Floor Over You." And I remember my Grandmother talking to him: "Drag it out, Ernest; drag it out." The radio was a mystery too great for a seven-year-old to fathom, even one with a rich imagination.

I think my grandfather was awed by the mystery of the technology also, because whenever a battery wore out he never threw it away. In fact, a mounting pile of crumbling batteries grew in the corner of the smokehouse, and I remember lying on the smokehouse floor one long summer afternoon poking at the batteries with a stick to see if I could prod Ernest into one more "I'm Walking the Floor Over You."

That was forty years ago, but I am not sure that I have changed very much. I still have limited knowledge, and if I were to confess the absolute truth, fairly limited interest in technology. I still drive the 1964 Volkswagen bug I bought brand new. I still use the same stereo I purchased twenty years ago as a graduate student. Only one speaker works, but I hear everything I need to hear. I have made one concession, however, and that is to use the microwave in our kitchen; but so far I have only used it to melt butter. A Cuisinart sits menacingly on the shelf in the pantry, but I have failed to succumb to its arrogant pressure. I am, obviously, a technologically disabled person living as an anachronism in a time when everyone else is becoming technologically literate.

I do know what my problem is. With the media and my friends constantly bombarding me with information about the technology, I have had to be introspective, and I can recognize three hurdles.

First, I do not understand how any of these new technologies work. The steam engine I understand. There were diagrams of the steam engine in my eighth grade science book, and the kettle on my stove provided a clear example of the basic principle. But no one ever explained electronics to me. There were no diagrams of satellites and computers in my eighth grade science book.



When I ask for help, I am told that I do not have to understand; I only have to accept and learn to operate. Now that is confusing to me after having been told all my life that I had to understand. Nevertheless, I am willing to take a leap of faith and to believe without understanding. In that regard, my Baptist minister becomes a lot like my computer literacy instructor, and I have been down that road before. Technology is a mystery I can handle, and with faith that passeth understanding I can go forth into the world with loins girded to do battle.

The second hurdle, however, is more difficult for me. The concepts are hard enough; the language with which they are explained is impossible. I have no training in speaking in numbers and shorthand. The fact that someone drives a 280-Z or a 450-SL tells me nothing about what is driven. I pay Southern California Gas for *therms* used and Southern California Edison for *killowatts* used, but I do not know what I have paid for. An insert in my gas bill tells me to purchase a *digital* thermostat; my daughter has a *digital* radio; my son owns a *digital* wristwatch; and there is even a National Digital Corporation. But what does *digital* mean? And *chips*. What are *chips* that seem to be the central clue to the mystery of how it all works? Chip off the old block, chipped tooth, my dog Chip, chocolate chip? What is chip that thou art mindful of him?

Bytes and *megabytes*? They are only misspelled words to me. And although 64K has been explained to me several times, the explanation never stays in my memory. *Uplink* sounds like a rude Italian gesture.

And these are the simple words. What about the higher order words used by the technologist to explain the larger mysteries: *cellular radio*, *organic computers*, *fiber optics*, *holography*, *bubble memories*, *biocybernetics*, *videocom*, *optecom*. I feel like a bone-head English student who suddenly finds himself in second-year Latin.

The third hurdle has to do with the media hype to sell computers. The marketing offices are constantly trying to seduce me with exciting promises of new experiences, luring me on with exotic shapes and forms and ever cheaper prices. Late one evening in a moment of weakness I even entered the aptly named Radio *Shack*--a house of ill compute. Shyly I ran my fingers over some of the more well-developed models and blanched when a salesman asked me if I had tried one of the *user-friendly* models. He said I could use whatever software I wanted. With a sly grin he said he had a friend who could line me up with an Apple if I didn't see anything I liked there. When he started talking about The Source, I fled this supposed Garden of Eden, my innocence intact.

And yet--there is something that intrigues me about the technology; something related to hopes and dreams and larger visions pulls me to it. In my little Baptist heart I see in technology the hope of answers--answers about expanding, growing, improving, and learning. The seeker in me pursues that hope--and in spite of my great ignorance, in spite of my lack of training, in spite of my resistance, in spite of my English teacher's understanding of the world--I want to learn about technology. My goal is to lift myself up from the technologically disabled and to become, perhaps not able, but at least, more comfortable, more secure and more useful than I am. Perhaps I will even get my other speaker repaired so I can hear Ernest Tubb in stereo.

Terry O'Banion, Executive Director
League for Innovation in the Community College

For further information, contact the author at 23276 South Pointe Drive, Suite 103, Laguna Hills, CA 92653.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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