

Sunday March 10, 2013

New technologies want your job

By Jim Taylor

Our 13-year-old Volvo, now pushing 250,000 km, shows signs of not being immortal after all. Nothing serious, mind you. Just minor inconveniences, like windows that jam, and dashboard lights that won't go off.

As a result, I've spent hours gawking at new cars in dealer showrooms while I wait for the irritants to be fixed. I'm astounded by the features available. Automatic braking, if you get too close to the car in front. Rear vision cameras, when backing up. Automatic warnings, should you wander out of your lane. Drowsiness alerts. Cruise control that will slow the car downhill. Automatic braking for pedestrians or objects in your path.

Some new cars will even park themselves. Push the button, take your hands off the wheel, and let the car do the job for you.

Who needs drivers any more?

Indeed, I can imagine these technologies combining with GPS navigation systems. Program your destination into the car's computer; the car will do the rest. (At least this would eliminate the irritating voice that keeps saying, "Recalculating...")

It was ever thus. When I was a teenager, in the car-crazy 1950s, enthusiasts quarreled over the merits of automatic transmissions. One group loved them, celebrating what technology and engineering could accomplish. The other group scorned automatic transmissions -- they didn't believe that any machine could supplant a driver's skills.

Obsolete skills

But that's what all new technologies do. They take over a skill that once belonged to a select few. Sometimes they give that skill to the unskilled masses. Sometimes they just take it away, period.

Pocket calculators, for example. Young people no longer bother learning mental math. Author Ward Kaiser pulled up at a U.S. gas station. The sign told him to pay inside before pumping.

"Tell me how much you want," the attendant inside demanded.

"It'll take ten gallons," said Kaiser.

Nope, she wanted the figure in dollars, not in gallons.

"At \$2.95 a gallon, ten gallons will be \$29.50, right?" he replied.

Kaiser recalls, "The attendant looked at me as if I had just breezed in from an unknown planet. After a moment of silence she called out to another worker, 'Tom, this guy wants ten gallons. What does that come to? I don't have my calculator with me.'"

Long distance weapons abolished the skill of creeping up on unsuspecting prey. Wheel, roller and lever rendered pure brawn obsolete. Textile mills put home spinners and weavers out of business. Printing presses ended the need for monks laboriously copying manuscripts by hand.

And now, when you shop at Canadian Tire and Home Depot, you're expected to be your own unpaid self-serve cashier.

Loss of tax revenues

As B.C. lurches towards a provincial election, it becomes increasingly apparent that this government – indeed, any government – has failed to consider the effect of new technologies. Which are rushing upon us faster and faster.

As retired bank economist David Bond noted recently, the proportion of taxable citizens in the population is steadily shrinking. Bond attributed this to demographics – principally the growing number of baby boomers leaving the work force and entering retirement.

But there's another factor, too -- the people whose jobs will be affected by new technologies. Some will face unemployment, others underemployment.

Why, after all, should a business pay people to do a job that can be done more efficiently by a machine? And cheaper, too.

Machines are expensive, yes. But they don't take sick leave or vacations. They can work more than one shift a day. They don't demand pension plans. Or annual raises.

But who pays?

Fifty years ago, magazines like Popular Mechanics and Popular Science imagined a world in which robots did all the work. In industry, of course. In the home, too. Think of all the appliances that do tasks once requiring servants.

Automation would free people for leisure activities, these publications dreamed. But they didn't consider who would pay for that free time. When computer typesetting supplants linotype operators, should linotype operators continue to get wages for not working?

Can governments collect income tax from the robot arms that weld cars together on an assembly line?

Consider the math. If a single piece of heavy equipment such as an excavator replaces 40 pick-and-shovel labourers, the government loses 39 income-tax sources. One – the operator – gets a new job.

Sure, governments can tax the corporation that owns the excavator. But when corporate tax rates are half those of individuals, or less, the government is a net loser.

Bond suggested that governments might have to substitute higher sales taxes for those lost income taxes. But machines and computer programs do not buy consumer goods. And displaced workers have less income to spend on anything.

Regardless of which party forms the new government in B.C., there will eventually have to be a massive adjustment in the ways governments collect enough income to keep functioning.

But I don't see any government even starting to think about it yet.

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YOUR TURN

First, a word about spam. I've been getting a lot of e-mail recently, purportedly coming from me to myself. If that means that someone has burgled the mailing lists for my columns, I'm sorry. We're trying to track the origin of these spurious e-mails, so far without success.

So let me just say this – if you get any e-mail from me, or from anything labeled “softedges” or “sharpedges”, that isn't either a regular column or a direct response from me to a note you've previously sent me, don't open it! Trash it!

If I choose to write to you, collectively or individually, I will try to make sure that the subject line clearly identifies my reason for writing.

Stephani Keer, like me, used to be a journalist. "I, too, have been struggling with an overload of written material," she wrote. "Some years ago, I drew up a will specifying that anything I had written should be destroyed. My Goddaughter's mother argued that this young woman I hold so dear had a right to know me through my writing, especially through my journals. I have compromised by naming a literary trustee who will hold the material for ten years, giving access to my Goddaughter and a cousin who lives in Texas.

"I was a political columnist for a lot of years. I kept the secrets with which I was entrusted, but I wrote them down and kept them. I don't want that material released inappropriately but some of it shows history that should not be completely lost because, well, it is history.

"The Calgary Public Library may want the political material. My alma mater may want some. Perhaps it will end up destroyed. I don't know. I am glad you have found a home for your material. There is too much wisdom, too much truth, in what you write for it to be lost."

Mary-Margaret Boone celebrated those who collect significant bits of the past: "We have people at our churches whose families have lived here for generations, and thankfully they have bits and pieces of history that has been preserved. I use that material for special Sunday services. I love history and truly believe it shapes who we are.

"I am not a prolific writer but I am a prolific photographer. I have hundreds maybe thousands of photographs that highlight family, work, church, Scouting and Guiding, even the Toronto Zoo. It's my way of preserving history and the changes that occur even in our own lifetime. I offered the photos to the Scouting archives and they declined. The pictures are all labeled and dated and cover a period when the leader uniform changed at least three times and the rituals were distinctly different from today. It's a real treat to look at them now as I preside at some of these kid's weddings!

"We cannot nostalgically live in the past but we need the past to see where we are and where we are going. After all, the Bible was written for a time long ago and it is still shaping our lives!"

Charles Hill discovered something in common with me: "So you are an 'only!' I am too. Both of my parents, however, came from families of 10+ children. I have the same issue to what to do with my pictures dating back to the early 1940s. Pictures of me when I was cute. My children don't want them. I have never been important to my grandchildren.

"I have been a relatively prolific writer in the field of education, both academic journals and church-related magazines. I am also bold enough to write my own Sunday School lessons when I teach. Everything I have written is either saved in paper form or on an electronic media. Who wants them? Now I can understand Solomon who reportedly wrote, 'There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow. (Ecclesiastes 1:11.)'

Laurina Tallman always has some interesting thoughts: "From the standpoint of literary studies, the great barrier to interest in the past is the 'New Criticism' that shifted rational critical analysis of authors' works, which required learning all one could about the person and his or her historical time and social context, to the personal, emotional reactions of the analyst.... As emotions are transitory and rely on intensity for perpetuation, the literary work of our day must be shocking and novel in its dystopian depression and cynicism to draw attention and to make a claim on durability. The more esoteric, arcane, and bizarre the subjects of the imaginations of the authors, the more likely they will sell."

Laurina also argued, "Apparently 'slurping' from a common cup is more sanitary (especially if the wine contains alcohol) than using the doorknobs in your home."

But if the wine doesn't include alcohol?

Nenke Jongkind says she usually finds some inspiration in these mailings. Last week, it came from Elsie Goertzen's letter about women who have experienced abuse: "Women who experience forms of abuse other than physical (i.e. emotional, spiritual, verbal, psychological, sexual, etc.) continually tell me that those forms are much more hurtful than physical violence."

Nenke wrote, "It was especially that last sentence that helped me understand how the memory of that pain, so long ago now, can at times continue to pierce me. In 1969 in the Christian Reformed Church, separation and subsequent divorce was not 'done' by 'good girls' who came from 'good families'. It didn't happen to Christians but only to 'them'.

“No wonder I experienced 35 years between husbands.”

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
