

Hooked on Gigabytes:

Confessions of a Gadget Junkie

by

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Introduction

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Mark, 8:36

What shall it profit a man, if he acquires all the gadgets in the world, and loses his WiFi?

Kerry, 2018

It is amazing, looking back over the past half century, how information, communication, and entertainment technologies have modernized in ways even Jules Verne did not envision. Indeed, in less than 50 years, our daily lives have evolved to revolve around a plethora of gadgets that deliver gigabytes of data that Johannes Gutenberg could not have imagined when he invented the printing press in the mid-1400s. But our journey from "gadgets" to "gigabytes" begins not in 1450 but 500 years later in the mid-1950s.

I always find it easy to remember in what year I was in which grade during primary school and high school, since I entered 1st grade in 1951, 2nd grade in 1952, and so on. Those years were much simpler times. If you can recall or believe, letters were actually written by hand or typed if one had a typewriter, sealed in a stamped envelope, and put in the mailbox. Days or more likely weeks later a reply letter would be received from the person to whom you had sent the letter.

One certainly didn't think about bytes or gigabytes when you wrote that letter (a first class stamp was only two or three cents) – and the lexicon of the Internet, bandwidth, streaming, gigabytes, and having to keep track of passwords was not yet even on the horizon of the average citizen. Such gadgets as there were in one's home amounted to no more than, say, the mailbox on the front porch, an AM radio on the kitchen counter, a telephone on the kitchen counter or wall, an AM radio in the car, and perhaps a television in the living room. Each gadget had a specific function: the mailbox for sending and receiving letters; the radio and TV for enjoying music, news, weather, and sports; and the phone for making and receiving phone calls. There also were newspapers and magazines that were delivered on subscription right to one's front door or purchased at a local store or newsstand. One might even have owned a box camera.


THE STATE JOURNAL

★ ★ ★ LANSING—EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN, THURSDAY, APRIL 28, 1955 336 Pages

Life back then may not have been all that simple, but our gadgets certainly were few in number compared with today's average household. In those pre-1950s years that followed the Great Depression and World War II, before "keeping up with the Jones" became a frenzy, our gadgets helped meet basic information, communication, and entertainment needs in an era when making ends meet was of greater priority than chasing after whatever was the next "new and improved" gadget.

Yet, over the next 50+ years, technological change came at an increasingly faster pace. Not far behind, aggressive marketing and advertising campaigns promoted not only consumer purchase of "new and improved" models of gadgets we already owned but also consumer awareness, interest, and trial of innovative products that further expanded our information, communication, and entertainment horizons.

Back then we might have worried about what would be our next "gig" (e.g., our next family get together over the holidays or our next summer vacation). Today, however, with all the gadgets in and around one's home, we worry not only whether our bandwidth and data plans will stream enough "gigabytes" to fuel the appetites of the gadgets already in our home or carry with us "on the road" but also whether to upgrade to newer models of those gadgets – or even be innovators to try out some newfangled innovation now available in the marketplace.

Not unlike all those letters received for the "We Get Letters" segment of *The Perry Como Show* (1955) — "We get letters, we get letters, we get lots and lots of letters…" — over the ensuing years and decades "we" or I acquired ("got") gadgets, indeed, lots and lots of gadgets!

This essay, in a very personal way, recalls the "gadgets" and "gigabytes" that, as in the song *To All the Girls I've Loved Before*, came in and out my door over the past 50+ years.

Did I really need to upgrade to a newer model of a gadget I already owned or should I have taken the plunge to be an early adopter (among the first) to purchase the latest technological marvel advertised by those gadget's manufacturers?

Did my gadgets deliver enough gigabytes of data, information, and entertainment for the "fix" I needed? Could I resist buying yet another new gadget? Truth be told, I couldn't, surely proof that that I must have been, if not still am, a "gadget junkie"!

Here now are the confessions of a gadget junkie organized into a baker's dozen of shorter vignettes as follows: From Manual Typewriters to Personal Computers; From Floppy Drives to Cloud Drives; From Laptops to Tablets; From Landline Phones to Smart Phones; From AM/FM Radios to Shortwave Radios; From Reel Tape Recorders to Portable Cassette Players-Recorders; From Car Radios to Satellite Radios; From CD Players to DVD and Blu-ray Players; From VHS Tapes to Blu-ray Discs; From Hi-Fi to Wi-Fi; From Swing to Sling; From Letters to Emails; and From "Turned On" to "Tuned In."

From Manual Typewriters to Personal Computers

As of the mid-1950s my parents owned and used a Royal Quiet De Luxe manual typewriter, one like the 1947 Royal typewriter in the photo below. When my parents moved to the Philippines in 1963, I went off to college (Michigan State University) with that Royal typewriter – and on it typed letters to home and term papers – my own as well as those of other dormitory residents which brought in some extra cash.

Royal Quiet De Luxe Manual Typewriter

In the early 1960s, when my father was researching and writing his doctoral dissertation, he purchased an IBM Selectric typewriter with the whirling type ball. Instead of a type key (one letter per key), this IBM model featured a type ball that rotated and pivoted before hitting the paper, moving from left to right across the page. In fact, the model my father purchased was the same 1961 model (in green) shown in the photo below.

IBM Selectric Typewriter

I probably donated that old Royal typewriter to charity by the late 1960s or early 1970s, when as a graduate student at Iowa State University I bought a Smith Corona Coronet electric typewriter like the one in the photo below. I used that typewriter for many years until finally purchasing a personal computer around 1986.

Smith Corona Coronet Portable Electric Typewriter

After completing my Ph.D. and starting my first job at the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), I was assigned my own IBM Selectric. By the mid-1980s, while working with the U.S. Agency for International Development, my office-based typing was done on a Wang word processing system.

Then, around 1986, I purchased my first personal computer (PC), very similar to the one shown in the photo below. It had two large (5”) floppy drives and only 64K of RAM – and needed to be booted by inserting the boot floppy disc in drive A (on the left), after which one had to pull that floppy out and insert the floppy having the software one wanted to use. Drive B (on the right) was used to insert the floppy on which data was stored (saved). I often thought that one would wear out one’s arm and elbow with all that loading and unloading of floppies.

Early IBM-Type Desktop PC

Eventually I replaced that dinosaur PC with a more modern PC, one with a Windows operating system and a hard drive. Over the years I went through several Windows versions either through buying a new computer or upgrading to a newer Windows OS than the one I owned at the time. Around 2000, I bought a Dell PC with Windows ME – the Millennium Edition – as the operating system. Since then I’ve upgraded twice to a newer PC, the most recent PC with Windows 7, the operating system for which I subsequently upgraded to Windows 10.

One blessing of our January 2016 downsizing from a house to a condo is that my desk is located next to the “wi-fi” router so I get faster Internet speed because the PC is hooked up directly to the router via an Ethernet cable. My current desktop computer system is shown below.

Kerry’s Computer System (Monitor Sitting on Harman Kardon CDR 20 CD Duplicator)

From Floppy Drives to Cloud Drives

Storage for the data one generates on a personal computer also evolved, from large (5”) floppies, then to small (3.5”) floppies, then to (optional) ZIP discs that required a separate external drive for saving data to the ZIP’s floppy, and then to external hard disk drives that have come down in size and price at the same time their gigabytes of memory have increased.

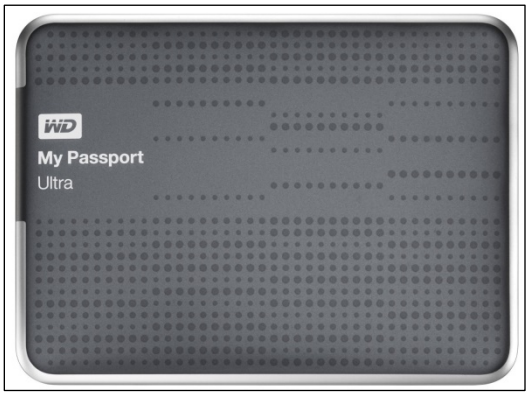
Illustrative Large (5”) and Small (3.5”) Floppy Discs

ZIP Drive & ZIP 100 Meg Disk

I’ve owned several external hard drives by manufacturers from Seagate (see first photo below) to Western Digital (see second photo below) – both the size of square bricks. Yet the GB of memory that these devices can hold seems to have increased as fast as their physical size has shrunk and their prices have declined. Indeed, my most recent external hard drive, a Western Digital My Passport Ultra 1 TB (third photo below), is just a bit larger than a deck of playing cards.

Seagate Free Agent Desk USB 2.0 External Hard Drive

Western Digital My Book External Hard Drive



Western Digital My Passport Ultra 1 TB

Then along came the innovation of the UBS flash drive, jump drive, thumb drive, or whatever their manufacturers call this device. These little “memory marvels” (other than the USB connector) come in all shapes, colors, and memory sizes. Indeed, these devices’ prices have fallen as fast as their gigabytes of memory have increased.

Illustrative Examples of Flash/Jump/Thumb Drive

The evolution from 5.5” floppy to 3.0” floppy, to internal hard drives, to external hard drives, to flash/jump/thumb drives was only the start of the rest of the story. Beyond these gadgets even more and more data (from bytes to gigabytes) are now being stored in the “cloud” (e.g., Dropbox.com), that is, on off-site (away from one’s computer) land-based “data farms” which host an increasing number of software- and data-storing servers.

From Laptops to MacBook Pro

While working with USAID and traveling to the developing world, I initially did my writing by hand or, in a rare instance (e.g., 1986 in Panama), working on a computer in a USAID Mission or renting a desktop PC for use at my hotel. Eventually the USAID project on which I was working bought several laptop computers, nice but heavy to carry. After some years we replaced those laptops with smaller models, initially ones with an internal CD/DVD drive.

After a while, we looked for something smaller and lighter, and settled on buying Netbooks (the **Eee PC Model 1005HA Netbook** shown in photo below). They were serviceable for a period but came with a disadvantage: they lacked an internal CD/DVD drive. For CD/DVD functionality, one had to haul a separate external CD/DVD drive along with the netbook when on assignment. Over time another disadvantage evolved – it was increasingly difficult for the Netbook’s operating system to keep pace with the demands of newer software applications being used by the Agency when it upgraded its desktop operating systems. Plus, in the case of two netbooks, they simply stopped operating (e.g., wouldn’t boot).

Eee PC Model 1005HA Netbook

As long as I had access to a laptop or netbook during my years on the job, I kept putting off buying my own laptop, since I had access to PC at my desk in the office, a PC on my desk at home, and access to the office laptops and/or netbooks whenever I needed them. However, after retiring in September 2014, I decided to buy a laptop. A Best Buy sales representative convinced me that the Windows-based laptops are of poor quality and break down or become increasingly obsolescent with the passage of time.

The way to go, he proposed, was to buy an Apple MacBook Pro. I did but had to get up a learning curve to navigate how the MacBook's desktop is organized, in the process discovering that MS Office for Mac requires some different keystroke commands than I was accustomed to using in Word for Windows. To get properly oriented, I went (and kept going back) to the local Apple dealer for guidance on what key strokes to use to get the desired result in Word for Mac.

Apple MacBook Pro

From Landline Phones to Smart Phones

From the time I was a child growing up in Worthington, Ohio and then in East Lansing, Michigan, our phone was a rotary dial phone that sat on a desk or was hung on the wall (see photos below). While my parents lived in Ohio and later Michigan back in the ‘50s, one had to place a long distance call through the operator. Indeed, even in the early ‘50s when we moved to Michigan, our first phone line was a party line having two or more customers on it. If you picked up the phone and heard someone on the line, proper etiquette was to hang up and wait until the other party finished his or her call – of course, a guessing game because one didn’t know if the other party had hung up unless one picked up the phone to check if there was a dial tone or if the other party was still on the line.

Old Rotary Dial Desktop and Wall-Hung Phones

By the late 1960s, after marrying Sonia, we graduated to one of those slim-line (Princess) model phones with a rotary dial or touchtone buttons on either the base of the phone or on the handset.

Illustrative Vintage Landline Princess Phones (Rotary Dial or Touchtone Button)

At some point, we added an answering machine to our system until along came phones with built-in answering machines, which eventually we adopted. Today we have a Panasonic phone and answering machine with a base unit phone and four extension phones (see first photo below) – plus a three phone set with base unit phone and two extension phones (see second photo below). So we have phones in every room – living room, kitchen, master bedroom, guest bedroom, and office (but still no phones in the bathrooms).

Panasonic KX-TG6641 DECT 6.0 Expandable Cordless Phone with 5 Phones & Answering Machine

Panasonic KX-TG6311S DECT 6.0 Expandable Cordless Phone with 3 Phones

Around the mid-1990s, with cell phones starting to become more affordable, Sonia bought a simple model – and, not to be left behind, I soon followed. Over the space of a few years to a decade or so, we went from simple cell phones to flip phones to smart phones. Every now and then we switched to a "new and improved" model, going from a Nokia to a LG – and then Sonia to an Apple iPhone and Kerry to a Motorola Droid 3 followed by a Samsung Galaxy S3 and most recently a Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge. Along the way, we jumped from one service carrier to another, initially both of us on Sprint and then Verizon, and eventually Sonia with ATT and Kerry with Verizon since I've not wanted to give up the unlimited data plan contract I originally had with Verizon when I purchased the Motorola Droid 3.

Nokia 5110 (Sprint) & LG VX 8700 Flip Phone (Verizon)

Motorola Droid 3 (Verizon) & Samsung Galaxy S3 (Pebble Blue) (Verizon)

Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge Smart Phone (Verizon)

In retrospect, when I got the Motorola Droid phone, I was fortunate that Verizon offered a fixed price unlimited data plan which I've kept now through three phones, upgrading that first Droid 3 to a Samsung Galaxy S3 and a few years later to a Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge. While Verizon occasionally hikes the unlimited data plan's price, I have kept the original unlimited data plan contract, opting to pay the full price for a new phone rather than buying it at a subsidized price (which would require switching to a new plan contract that would have limited data per month and be more costly in the long run). If I keep a new phone at least two years (and I kept the first Samsung four years before it started to deteriorate), then after two years I'm further ahead with my monthly bill than if I bought the phone with a subsidy but got stuck with a more expensive data plan with limited gigabytes.

My Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge smart phone plus earphones accompany me on walks around town as well as when I'm on the treadmill in our condo's fitness center. While the phone has a good speaker, I also listen to phone-sourced music via a Bluetooth connection to my Bose SoundLink Color Speaker (I chose mint over the red, white, blue, and black models). This speaker also is an alternate way to listen to music streamed via Bluetooth from my PC computer or my Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 tablet. Plus, in my Honda, I can "pair" my Samsung phone with Honda's audio system and then listen to all of my Pandora channels while driving. The possibilities are almost endless!

Bose SoundLink Color Speaker

One possible “shortcoming” of my legacy Verizon service contract is that I didn’t include texting as part of my Verizon contract's unlimited data plan. Thus, sending and receiving text messages costs me on a per message basis. Therefore I avoid texting (sending or receiving text messages). I often ask friends and family to call or email since I don’t do any of those three Ts -- text, tweet, or twerk!

From AM/FM Radios to Shortwave Radios

For Boy Scout camp one summer my parents loaned me a portable tube radio that, if not connected by its power cord to a wall outlet, required a large battery for its power. It only tuned in AM stations, evidence that my parents probably acquired this radio back in the ‘40s, before the dawn or widespread availability of FM radio. I don’t remember the radio’s brand or model name so the image below is only illustrative.

Illustrative Portable Radio (Powered by Electrical Cord or Battery) (circa early 1950s)

In 1959, as a freshman in high school, my parents’ gifted me a canary yellow Westinghouse 7 transistor radio (Model H698PF). Back then, no earplug, so one often walked along holding the radio’s speaker up to one’s year or hung it on the handlebars of one’s bicycle.

<u>Westinghouse Transistor Radio H698PF</u> (Canary Yellow)

During the late 1950s or early 1960s my father surprised me with the gift of an AM "pillow speaker radio" formerly housed in a hospital above a patient's bed as illustrated below in the photo on the left. As you can see more clearly in the photo on the right, the Dahlberg Pillow Speaker Radio (Model 4130 D1) was designed to function as a coin-operated radio ("Deposit 1 to 5 Dimes").

Dahlberg Pillow Speaker Radio (Model 4130 D1) (Green)

However, the same pale green radio that Dad brought home had been modified to operate without needing to deposit any money; you turned it on simply by lifting the "pillow speaker" off its hook on the left side of the radio. The bottom of the radio had two metal prongs that, as in the right photo above, were inserted into two drilled holes in a block of wood. Similarly, I installed the radio by drilling two holes into the top of the bookshelf beside my bed. As you can see, the radio was designed with an inverted slide rule dial that a hospital patient could read while lying on his or her back. Note that the numbers on the dial go from 550 AM on the left to 1600 AM on the right but are inverted so that patient, lying on his or her back, sees the station's frequencies going from 1600 AM on the left of the dial to 550 AM on the right of the dial.

While in college at Michigan State – and I have no memory of how I came into possession of this – I had a Panasonic AM/FM radio, in fact, the same model as pictured below. Many a night in my dorm room was spent studying while listening to Top 40 radio on 1240 AM (WJIM) or 1320 AM (WILS) – or to easy listening ("music for the middle brow") music on WJIM-FM.


Panasonic Model RE-7487 FM-AM 10 Transistor Wood Cabinet Table Top Radio

Speaking of radios – and looking beyond crystal radios, portable tube radios, transistor radios, and tabletop AM/FM radios, there is the whole wide world of shortwave radios.

My first exposure to shortwave radio was in the Philippines when my parents moved the family there in March of 1963. My parents brought with them to the Philippines (or purchased while there) a shortwave radio on which they listened to the Voice of America, the BBC, and the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS). I've always thought that one needed to be careful in typing this acronym – AFRTS – not to accidentally transpose the first two letters! In the evenings, my father would tune in Willis Conover's *Voice of America Jazz Hour*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb_o1T9lMXo&list=PL-9zU02fFlPWGngruxZgJF8khu0sTlKhy&index=6

http://av.voanews.com/clips/ENGL/manual/2012/05/16/f689c672-dbf0-4a06-ab84-e6df6af5c2e3.mp3

One evening as we listened to the "Voice of America Jazz Hour," the show's host, Willis Conover, played George Duning's haunting score to the film *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehuQuy5H6xc

At some point, while an undergraduate student at Michigan State University during the mid-1960s (1963-1967), I was looking to buy a small and lightweight FM transistor radio and purchased somewhat of a novelty radio – a Sony 2FA-24W FM automatic tuning radio. This radio, as shown in the photo below and YouTube video, had an automatic mechanical tuning system that worked by pressing the ON-OFF/VOL. knob. On pressing the knob, the radio would immediately look for the next strongest FM signal and stop on that station, at which point you could fine tune that station or tune adjacent less powerful stations using the transparent F.T. knob.

Sony 2FA-24W FM Automatic Tuning Radio

I can't recall the exact year that I purchased this radio but it had the distinction of being featured in the 1967 James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*. However, I was not particularly thrilled with the radio's performance and was happy, not long after acquiring it, to sell it to another student in the dormitory I was living in at the time.

When I started working in 1975 with the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), located in northwest Alabama, I acquired two radios, each to meet a different need. The first need was for a radio that could pull in distant AM stations in the United States. To meet this need, in the early 1980s, I purchased a GE Superradio as shown in the photo below. This radio's ability to pull in distant stations was shown one night when I listened to an NBA basketball game between the Philadelphia 76ers and the Los Angeles Lakers. With this GE Superradio I was able to listen to the game on two different channels: the game's broadcast by a Philadelphia AM station, the other by a Los Angeles AM station, with Chick Hearn, the longtime voice of the Los Angeles Lakers, calling the plays.

GE Superradio (circa mid-late 1980s)

Years later, living in northern Virginia, I wanted to be able to listen to Michigan State Spartan basketball games and found that my GE Superradio was not very effective at tuning in those games at night. So, in November of 2003, after some research to find a more powerful radio, I bought a Sangean CC Radio *plus*. This radio more effectively pulled in those evening Spartan basketball game broadcasts until I discovered a few years later that I could pull in those broadcasts even more clearly by listening to the games transmitted over the Internet by the Spartan Sports Network.

Sangean CC Radio *plus Radio*

The second need was for a portable shortwave radio, as I knew I would be traveling frequently on IFDC assignments to the developing world. Over the years I purchased several portable shortwave radios, eventually gifting earlier-purchased models to my two Colombian brothers-in-law. The first model that I bought was the Sony ICF-5900W but it had only manual tuning, no preset buttons, and was a bit too bulky for my carryon bag.

Sony ICF-5900W Shortwave Radio

At some point I replaced the Sony IF-5900W with a Sony ICF-2001. While this radio was not all that much smaller, it had preset buttons to program one's favorite stations, was slimmer, and fit more easily in my carryon bag.

Sony ICF-2001 Shortwave Radio

Shortwave radio technology marched on, with radio sizes getting smaller even if their prices didn't fall all that much, and at some point I replaced the Sony ICF-2001 with the Sony ICF-7600A FM/MD/SW 7 Band Receiver, a nicely designed compact shortwave radio. Back then my go to source for purchasing shortwave radios was 47th Street Photo, a New York City retailer who ran an ad every Sunday in the *New York Times* newspaper.

Sony ICF-7600A FM/MW/SW 7 Band Receiver

Not too further down the road, Sony put on the market a revised version of the ICF-7600, this time the ICF-7600D, which was the same size but had the added benefit of preset buttons—and soon I bought it to replace my ICF-7600.

Sony ICF-7600 D FM/MW/SW 7 Band Receiver

Not too long after I began working with USAID in Washington, DC in the mid-1980s, AFRTS suspended transmission via shortwave and switched to distributing its programming via satellite. Suddenly hauling a shortwave radio on my trips was not all that appealing, unless I wanted to settle for listening to the BBC or the Voice of America (VOA). Fortunately, arrival of satellite TV, via the big dishes even before DirecTV made inroads with the small dishes, brought a proliferation of TV programming, including many U.S. cable channels, to the Latin America and Caribbean region where I frequently traveled. Suddenly many hotels I stayed in during visits to the LAC region offered cable TV, including programming from the United States, often lifted off satellites before many of the U.S. cable channels began to scramble their satellite signal. The ability to watch CNN, Los Angeles Laker games, and even several stateside TV channels, available on a hotel's cable system or satellite dish, made being away from home a little easier.

This certainly wasn't an option back in the 1960s when our family lived in the Philippines. Nor was it an option during the mid-1970s to 1984 while I worked with IFDC and traveled to many countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and relied on one of my Sony shortwave radios to listen to AFRTS. Perhaps the last shortwave radio accompanying me on a few trips was the Sony WA-8000 MK2 10 Band FM/MW/SW 1-8 Stereo Cassette-Corder. However, with the passage of time and emergence of compact disc (CD) technology, the cassette player was doomed to go the way of the dinosaur. Even before that day the cassette player in this Sony unit stopped working!

Sony WA-8000 NK2 10 Band FM/MW/SW 1-8 Stereo Cassette-Corder

The need to have a shortwave radio while traveling also went the way of the dinosaur with the advent of the smart phone, the latest model of which is my Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge (previously discussed) for which downloadable apps (e.g., TuneIn Radio) allow one to tune in any AM or FM station around the world that streams its signal over the Internet. Even the app for SiriusXM Radio (see discussion in the next section) allows listening to one's favorite SiriusXM channels. In effect, today's smart phone allows one to carry a shortwave radio in one's pocket.

From Reel Tape Recorders to Portable Cassette Players-Recorders

In the early 1960s, my father began conducting interviews to collect data for his doctoral dissertation. He purchased and recorded these interviews on a Wollensak 1580 Stereo Hi-Fi Reel Tape Recorder (see photo below). On completing his doctorate in March 1963, dad moved the family to the Philippines, where this tape recorder became part of his "hi-fi" system.

Wollensak 1580 Stereo Hi-Fi Reel Tape Recorder

Over the summer of 1963, I bought a number of mono LPs and recorded them to reel-to-reel tape at the slowest speed in order to cram as many LPs as possible on one side of the tape – and then flipped the tape over and repeated the process to record the same number of LPs on the tape's other side, in the process getting 12 albums recorded on the tape. Unfortunately, when I went off to college, I never again had access to a reel-to-reel recorder and, thus, never was able to listen to that tape again. Eventually, however, I was able to obtain all or most of those albums either as LPs or eventually on compact disc (CD).

About a decade later, as I neared completing my doctoral program at Iowa State University in 1975, my wife Sonia asked me what I might like as a graduation present. With the prospect that my pending new job with the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) might lead to a posting overseas, I thought it would be practical to have a cassette player-recorder that could operate on batteries.

Sony TC-153SD Portable Stereo Cassette-Corder

After some looking around, we agreed that she would buy for me a Sony TC-153 SD Stereo Cassette-Corder which had dual power (electrical and battery), stereo recording capability, an internal speaker, and portability. While I never landed a posting overseas with IFDC, I put my Sony Cassette-Corder to extensive use at home taping my favorite LPs, often making a cassette copy of a soundtrack LP that I then traded to another collector in exchange for a soundtrack LP that I wanted to acquire for my collection. At some point, however, my Sony Cassette-Corder broke down and I opted not to have it repaired in light of a repair cost I viewed a bit excessive. I no longer remember what became of this unit, though I likely donated it to some charitable organization.

At the time I left IFDC in late 1984, a colleague asked me what going away gift I'd appreciate receiving as a farewell from my IFDC colleagues. While it was nice to be able to travel with a shortwave radio, that didn't allow me to listen to my favorite music. So I told my colleague that it would be neat to have a portable cassette player with AM-FM radio. That was the farewell gift (similar to the unit in the photo below) I received from IFDC. However, I found the cassette player a fragile device plus the hassle of hauling cassette tapes on my trips was not attractive. So I started to keep my eyes open for some other option with more pluses than minuses.

Illustrative Portable Cassette Player with AM/FM Radio

Eventually, while portable cassette players (Walkmans) continued to get smaller (as small as a thin pack of cigarettes), those models also got pricier. Given their small size and fragility, I feared owning one would all too quickly lead to it breaking down, so I never made the plunge into acquiring one of those sleek Walkman cassette players. Eventually, with the dawn of mp3 players, the cassette player also went the way of the dinosaur. Indeed, I finally donated all of my cassette collection to a charitable organization. After all, by then, I had more CDs than I had time to listen to all of them, so there was no point holding on to all of those cassettes.

From Car Radios to Satellite Radios

The demise of Top 40 radio over the years was accompanied by the rise of format-specific radio with stations specializing in one or another programming area: classical, jazz, news, rock, talk, soul, etc. But I found none of these formats appealing and felt increasingly estranged from the popular music of the day, none of which I particularly enjoyed. Increasingly I was finding, when driving my car, that there was nothing "on the radio" that I could stand listening to for any length of time, especially with all the commercial interruptions.

For a while I tried to "survive" by carrying a CD player with me in my car or playing CDs in the car's CD player once I owned a Honda Accord that had a CD player. While it was nice to listen to CDs of my favorite music, it was also a hassle to change discs every 30 minutes or so since my Honda didn't have a multiple CD changer. But one fine day along came XM Satellite Radio (and its competitor Sirius).

No longer able to stand listening to over the air stations on my car radio and tired of shuffling CDs into and out of the car's CD player, I decided in 2006 to purchase an XM Satellite Radio. I lucked out when I bought that radio (the XMP3 model) as I selected the subscription option of making a one-time payment for a lifetime subscription rather than paying monthly. I liked the deal so much I bought a second XMP3, also with a lifetime subscription, to have a second XM radio to listen to in our house (hooking it up to my Bose radio) and in my office (hooking it up to a pair of small Sony speakers).

XMP3 Radio

One day, as I was dashing from my car to catch the commuter bus, I accidentally dropped (and broke) the XMP3 radio that I was shuttling back and forth between home and office – and decided to replace it with the XM Onyx model with preset buttons to save one's favorite stations. Pressing those buttons while driving in a car was a safer way to tune to a different channel than trying to navigate a channel change on the XMP3.

XM Easy Dock & Play Radio

Unfortunately, in the condo apartment where we now live, there is no direct line of sight to the XM satellite, so my XM receiver's antenna doesn't pick up the satellite signal. Therefore, I loaned my XMP3 radio to my brother Kevin. However, before moving to the condo, when I purchased a Honda Accord (w/ Sirius XM radio), I transferred the lifetime subscription on my Onyx radio to the car's XM radio. Since that was the last of the three transfers allowed under that lifetime subscription plan, I'll drive my Honda until the day I die. Or, if I someday gift my Honda to grandson Braden, I'll recall the other XM radio from my brother, purchase a new car with XM radio, and transfer the lifetime subscription on that XMP3 radio to the new car.

From CD Players to DVD & Blu-ray Players

With the arrival of CD technology, I purchased the Sharper Image CD Player (with Sound Soother and Alarm Clock) – and traveled with it along with a case of CDs on my trips to Latin America and the Caribbean. Ultimately, however, I found this device still somewhat bulky, not to mention the hassle of having to also haul CDs on my trips.

Sharper Image CD Player with Sound Soother and Alarm Clock

Eventually I replaced the Sharper Image CD Player with a Sony ICF-CD1000 FM/AM CD Clock Radio (photos below). Compared with the Sharper Image CD player, this Sony FM/AM CD Clock Radio was smaller and weighed less – and for a while was a trusty travel companion albeit the unit lacked shortwave radio functionality. By then, however, one could follow the day's news on CNN or CNN International on a hotel's cable TV system.

Sony ICF-CD1000 Portable CD Clock Radio

But technology continued to march forward and, with the arrival of the DVD, I began thinking it would be nice to be able to watch movies in the evenings or on the weekends during my business trips. Fortunately, at this time, the project on which I worked with USAID upgraded our laptops to a smaller and less heavy model that included an internal CD/DVD drive. My first trip with this laptop was to Panama where I put the laptop's DVD player to the test one evening watching a DVD of *Thunderball* (1965). However, while on board an airplane, getting the laptop out of my carryon bag was inconvenient but then along came the invention of the portable DVD player.

My initial foray into portable DVD player technology was buying a Mintek MDP-1010 DVD Player with a 10.2" (diagonal) screen. However, with the noise of an airplane's engines, and even wearing a Bose Noise-Cancelling headphone set, this DVD player had surprisingly low volume output. So much so that, after searching around, I discovered a small, battery-powered sound amplifier product – the Boostaroo Revolution, a device that you plug into your portable audio/video player and then plug your headphones into at the other end. The device effectively boosted the volume of the audio signal. The Boostaroo served as a portable audio amplifier doubling the sound levels I could get out of my Mintek DVD player.

Mintek MDP-1010 DVD Player & Boostaroo Revolution Amplifier

Unfortunately, I discovered one day that the left hinge on the door to the compartment where one inserts a CD or DVD had broken on the Mintek DVD Player, leaving the door's right hinge at risk it might also break. Now, during an airline flight, I had to be extra careful taking a disc out of or putting it into the player to avoid breaking the door's other hinge. A further hassle was a growing realization that my office laptop, the Mintek DVD Player, the case of CDs and DVDs, and my Bose Noise Cancelling Headphone were all taking up too much space in my carryon bag. Plus I was finding it a bit of a hassle to avoid the combination of player, Boostaroo, headphones, and cables getting entangled in one's seat belt, thus complicating the process, especially if the seat tray and meal tray had also to be maneuvered out of the way.

I needed to downsize something – and the problems with the Mintek DVD Player (its larger size, its low sound volume, and the broken door hinge) persuaded me to buy a new and smaller DVD player. I settled on the Panasonic DVD-LS850 (see photo below) with an 8.5" diagonal screen and better sound quality. Plus, being smaller than the Mintek 10.2" DVD Player, this Panasonic model had a smaller footprint and took up less space both in my carryon bag and on an airplane's drop down tray. Now I could eliminate the Boostaroo and its cables from my onboard "hi-fi" system and simply connect the Bose headphones directly to the DVD player's audio output.

Panasonic DVD-LS850 Portable DVD Player

The need to carry a portable DVD player on trips, however, soon changed. One Christmas my wife gifted me an iPad. But she had not consulted with me about this as I wouldn't have bought an iPad since Apple's operating system did not handle the Flash Player for video. So I took the iPad back to Best Buy as credit toward purchasing the Samsung Galaxy Tab S tablet with a 9.7" screen. After a year or so I gifted that tablet to my niece in Barcelona and bought a Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 tablet (see photo below) that has a larger 10.1" screen. I've stuck with this tablet, in part, because "new and improved" Samsung tablet models have, to date, a slightly smaller screen.

Samsung Galaxy S2 Tablet

From VHS Tapes to Blu-ray Discs

There have been several fronts in the video format war, the first of which began with the format battle between Sony's Betamax videocassette recorder and other manufacturers' Home Video System (VHS) videocassette recorder, with VHS eventually the winner. On another front there was the battle between the Capacitance Electronic Disc (CED) disk and the Laser Disk, the latter winning out as the foundation for later optical discs formats (Compact Disc, DVD, and Blu-ray Disc). On a third front was the battle between the High Definition or HD Video Disk and the Digital Video Disk (DVD), the DVD eventually the winner until a new rival, the Blu-ray Player and Disc, reared its head.

With many of the earlier consumer video format players and/or recorders so expensive, I held off on jumping into the fray until eventually purchasing a VHS videocassette recorder, but long ago forgot which brands/models were bought over the years. But, over time, I could see that even the once dominant market position of the VHS format was withering in the face of competition from the DVD and later the Blu-ray Disc. This realization eventually led me to purchase a Sony DVD player (now located in our guest bedroom), later a Samsung BD-C7900 Blu-ray Player (now located in the master bedroom), and most recently, a Samsung UBD K8500 4K Ultra High Definition (UHD) Blu-ray Player (located in our living room).

Sony DVP-NS75H CD/DVD Player

Samsung BD-C7900 Blu-ray Player

Samsung UBD-K8500 4K UHD Blu-ray Player

But the transition from VHS tapes to DVDs and Blu-ray Discs had one hitch – what to do with all the VHS tapes I had acquired, both pre-recorded tapes (e.g., films) as well as tapes I had recorded (e.g., television programs). Before donating the tapes to the library or throwing them out, I explored transferring the recorded programs on the VHS tapes to a DVD-R. A first step toward this option was buying a CyberHome CH-DVD 300 Player which I actually acquired for a totally different reason – “hacking”!

CyberHome CH-DVD 300 DVD Player

After some research on the Internet I had learned that with some DVD players, this CyberHome player included, one could enter a “hack” code (a sequence of buttons pressed on the unit’s remote control) that would “unlock” the unit’s region-specific coding. Let me explain. The CyberHome DVD player is/was sold in the United States as a Region 1 player, meaning that the player (as sold) could only play the DVDs sold in the United States, which DVDs are coded as Region 1 by their manufacturers. Thus, on a Region 1 DVD player, one can’t play a DVD that was manufactured with a different Region code (e.g., DVDs from Europe that have a different region code).

However, by pressing the right sequence of buttons on the CyberHome CH-DVD 300, one could “unlock” the Region 1 coding and release the unit’s capability to play non-Region 1 DVDs, that is, DVDs coded for geographic regions/markets outside the United States. Once I tracked down on the Internet the correct “hack” code and hooked up the CH-DVD 300 DVD player to my TV, I simply pressed the correct buttons on the remote control and converted this Region 1 player into a multi-region player. This then allowed me to watch DVDs from Europe that I had purchased but that were coded for Europe.

But then my attention turned to the bigger problem, how to convert my VHS tapes to DVD-Rs. For this I needed a DVD recorder and bought the CyberHome CH-DVR1600 DVD Recorder.

CyberHome CH-DVR 1600 DVD Recorder

The next step was connecting the VHS player up to the DVD recorder via a GoDVD! Model CD-200 Digital Video Enhancer and Duplicator.

GoDVD! Model CD-200 Digital Video Enhancer and Duplicator

Once these three pieces were hooked up, I put a blank DVD-R+ disc in the recorder's tray, pressed play on the VHS player, and then record on the DVD recorder. As soon as the pre-recorded tape comes to its end, one pressed the recorder's stop button and, *voilà*, a DVD copy of the VHS. The only problem is that the whole process, transferring multiple VHS tapes to DVD-R discs, was time-consuming and somewhat labor intensive, notably, having to pay attention and be ready, when the program on VHS had ended, to stop the DVR from continuing to record. But, in the end, I was able to dispose of all of my VHS tapes, selling them on eBay (e.g., VHS tapes of *The Fugitive* TV series), donating them to the library or charity, or throwing them out.

But the evolution yet continues to the extent there has been a demise in the demand for physical media (from CDs, DVDs, Blu-ray Discs, and discs with Ultraviolet versions of a film) and the emergence of Internet-based sources (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, etc.) from which one can download or stream almost any movie or TV show that you want.

From Hi-Fi to Wi-Fi

In 1953, after our family moved from Worthington, Ohio to a home outside East Lansing, Michigan (just across Hagadorn Road from the farm fields of Michigan State College), my parents set about acquiring new furniture and, along the way, my father purchased his "hi-fi" system – a radio tuner, an amplifier, a record player, and a monophonic speaker. I spent many hours on the floor next to that speaker listening to Detroit Tiger baseball games and Spartan basketball and football games. My parents also had some "hi-fi" (mono) long-playing records and I often played them, listening to artists such as Harry Belafonte or musicals such as *My Fair Lady* and *The King and I*.

Soon after starting my freshman year at Michigan State University, I bought a portable stereo record player (similar to the one shown in the photo below) with a drop-down turntable and detachable left and right speakers. While this unit could play records in stereo, it was not the "hi-fi" system young men back then dreamt of having to adorn one's pad.

Illustrative Portable Stereo Record Player w/ Dropdown Turntable & Detachable Speakers

While the above portable stereo record player accompanied me in 1969 to Ames, Iowa, when I enrolled in a doctoral program in sociology, I continued to dream about getting my own “hi-fi” system, a dream that came true when Sonia and I, on a return trip from Cali, Colombia in 1971, stopped over in Panama City to visit the Panama Canal and shop for a “hi-fi” system.

I purchased a Kenwood KR-4140 Stereo Receiver, a Dual 1219 Turntable, and two Kenwood KL Two-Way Speakers. With the exception of the receiver that I subsequently replaced twice to upgrade to equipment with Dolby Noise Reduction and other features, the turntable and speakers were operational in my “hi-fi” system for the next 34 years until donated to charity in 2016. This donation was driven by the need to downsize our possessions when we moved to a condo with only 52% of the floor space we had in the house that we had been living in for the previous 22+ years.

Kenwood KR-4140 Stereo Receiver

Dual 1219 Turntable

Kenwood KL-2080 Two-Way Speakers

During those years, upgrading my “hi-fi” system included adding a Yamaha HTR-5250 5.1 Channel Audio Visual Receiver; a Pioneer CT-W710R Double Cassette Deck; a VHS Hi-Fi Videocassette Player-Recorder; a Pioneer Multi-Play Compact Disc Player (PD-M701); KLH Model 3430A Home Theater Speakers for Dolby Pro Logic (rear and center channels); and a KLH SW-10 110 Watt Subwoofer. Later I added a Sony CDP-CX355 300-disc CD changer that turned out to be a somewhat useless purchase because I never used it for any length of time, especially with the hassle of loading and unloading CDs.

Yamaha HTR-5250 5.1 Channel Audio Visual Receiver

Pioneer CT-W710R Stereo Double Cassette Deck

Pioneer PD-M701 6-Disc Multi-Play CD Changer

Sony CDP-CX355 300-Disc CD Changer

KLH 3430A Home Theater Speakers for Dolby Pro Logic (Rear & Center Speakers)

KLH SW-10 110 Watt Subwoofer

By this point, our home had, to the best I could afford under a limited budget, not only a “hi-fi” system but our own “home theater.” However, over time, this not quite state-of-the-art “home theater” nirvana, located in our upstairs loft, began to unravel. I used the system less and less, only occasionally listening to music, spending more time on the main floor watching our new Samsung 40” LCD High Definition TV in the family room, preferring to watch movies on DVD on that TV rather than upstairs on my “home theater” in which the TV only had a 26” diagonal screen.

Not long after acquiring the Samsung TV, Sonia noticed how our bedroom’s old tube TV had such a small picture compared with the 40” TV in the family room. This quickly led to buying a LG 36” LCD High Definition TV for the bedroom. After adding a DVD player to the family room’s High Definition (HD) TV as well as to the bedroom’s HD TV, suddenly nobody was interested in going upstairs to watch TV or a movie on my “home theater” system – where the “weakest link” was an old 26” tube TV that could not display high definition (HD) channels. That set was sitting in my media center in a space not large enough to accommodate a large screen HD TV. So, basically, my nirvana “home theater” system was left abandoned and collecting dust.

Further, with my ‘hi-fi” system located upstairs, this made it difficult to listen to music downstairs in the master bedroom. This led to a decision to buy a Bose Wave Radio (Model AWR1-1W) for our bedroom, not to listen to AM or FM radio but rather to CDs once we connected the Bose’s auxiliary audio input to a small Sony WalkMan CD Player.

Bose Wave Radio (Model AWR1-1W)

Despite these efforts to establish a "within my budget" state-of-the-art hi-fi and home theater system, how we actually were listening to music was changing. Increasingly, it was easier to just pop a CD into the CD tray of my Dell desktop computer and listen to music on the computer's stereo speakers while I worked at the computer. Indeed, during this period, I bought a standalone TEAC P-A688 Fully Automatic Turntable that I hooked into the computer in order to transfer LPs to digital files on the computer – and then burn the digital files to CD-Rs. In this way, I saved many of my LPs to CDs, many of these albums yet to be released on commercial CD.

TEAC P-A688 Fully Automatic Turntable

To this system I also added a Harman Kardon CR 20 Dual-well CD Recorder for high speed duplication of CDs, thus making it possible to burn a backup copy of CDs to CD-Rs, after which I'd take those original CDs to a used CD store and sell them for cash or exchange them for other CDs. Another outlet was to sell them on eBay, selling only the original commercial CDs, never the copied CD-Rs.

Harman Kardon CR 20 CD Player-Recorder-Duplicator

Originally my Internet connectivity was via a phone line, dialing into AOL, and later to a local Internet company (Erols, later renamed Starpower, and then renamed RCN). Dialing up was a slow proposition, and particularly annoying to my wife when she felt I was hogging the phone line. About this time we started getting phone calls for a local pharmacy. On investigating why, I discovered that a company printing a local phone directory accidentally included our phone number as the pharmacy's number. As compensation for this inconvenience, I worked out with the directory's publisher a deal for the publisher to cover the cost of installing a second phone line in our house, which line I was then able to use exclusively to connect to the Internet.

At some point we realized that we could ditch the second phone line and switch to broadband connectivity by ditching our then cable provider and switching to Comcast. But, when the "cable guy" came to install the router for our Internet connection, he realized he had brought only a wireless router. Not wanting to delay re-hooking up to the Internet (and realizing a wireless connection would eliminate the need for cable to be run from the exterior of the house to our computers), I opted for the wireless router to be installed downstairs in the furnace room and an external modem installed on each of the two computers. Now we had broadband "wi-fi" in our house!

The arrival of "wi-fi" internet connectivity in our home opened the door for increased access to the Internet across a variety of devices, eventually including our smart phones, Sonia's iPads (regular size and mini), Sonia's netbook, my Samsung tablet, my MacBook Pro laptop, and the Grace and Logitech Internet radios I eventually purchased to stream music from Pandora, Sirius XM, and video streaming services.

As we approached the pending January 2016 move from our house to a condo in Reston Town Center, I had to face up to a crisis – that the condo simply would not have enough room for all the "stuff" in my "hi-fi" and "home theater" systems. Not having enough time before the move to try to sell all this "stuff" via Craig's List, I bit the bullet and, with sad *adieu*, donated almost all of my "hi-fi" equipment to a local charity, salvaging for our condo only the Harman Kardon CRD 20 (CD duplicator) now located on my desk under my computer monitor and the Pioneer PD-M701 Multi-Play Compact Disc Player now connected to my Bose Wave Radio in my office, thus allowing me to listen to CDs through the Bose's auxiliary input. In effect, what was once my (IMHO) near-nirvana "hi-fi" system has been downsized to a two-piece system – my CD player connected to my Bose Wave Radio (see photo below).

Bose Wave Radio as Speakers for CDs Playing on Pioneer CD Changer

As if these weren't enough, one of my Colombian brothers-in-law, on three successive visits, each time gifting me a streaming device, the first time an Apple TV now connected to the TV in our guest bedroom; the second time an Amazon Fire TV, first hooked up to our family room TV; and the third time, the new Amazon Fire TV (that streams 4K) now hooked to the Samsung TV in our living room. Through each device we can watch Netflix, thanks to my brother-in-law's kindness of including Sonia and me on their Netflix family account.

But, as one saving grace (no pun intended), my Grace Digital Mondo Internet Radio (Model GDI-IRC6000), located by my bed and connected to the "wi-fi" system, streams music from multiple Internet sources (e.g., Pandora and SiriusXM).

Grace Digital Mondo Internet Radio (Model GDI-IRC6000)

I purchased this radio to replace the Grace and Logitech Internet radios I had earlier purchased. For some reason, I was never able to get the Grace radio to tune Sirius XM, which led me to buy the Logitech. However, with upgrades SirusXM subsequently made to its distribution platform, the Logitech's firmware or software could no longer tune SiriusXM, hence why I decided to buy the Grace Digital Mondo Internet Radio (see photo below). Over time, I gifted those first two Internet radios to my Colombian brothers-in-law.

Grace Digital GDI-IR2000 Wi Fi Internet Radio

Logitech Squeezebox Radio Music Player with Color Screen

Now, we have HD televisions in our living room, master bedroom, and guest bedroom, the two in the living room and master bedroom being Samsung Smart TVs that, with their connectivity to our condo's "wi-fi" system, can stream audio or video services through their built in apps, while the guest bedroom's LG High Definition functions as a "Smart TV" via being connected to a Sony DVD player with Apps allowing the TV to connect to streaming services on the Internet. Indeed, with our "downsizing" move to the condo, we hung the 50" Samsung TV on our bedroom wall and bought a 60" Samsung TV that is hung on our living room wall.

Apple TV and Amazon Fire TV

From Swing to Sling

Here "Swing" is used as a metaphor referring to those bygone days when I hauled a case of CDs and/or DVDs on a business trip in order to provide programming for my portable CD or DVD player. But what if one didn't need to haul a CD player and a case of CDs in order to listen to one's favorite music? What if one didn't need to haul a DVD player and a case of DVDs in order to watch a movie or one's favorite TV shows? Indeed, what if one could simply leave those CDs and DVDs at home and watch one's TV shows and movies on one's laptop, tablet, or even smart phone while one is away from home or even traveling overseas? What if there was a video-like equivalent to shortwave radio that would allow one, while traveling overseas, to turn on one's smart phone, iPad or tablet, or laptop and watch in one's hotel room the programs, live or recorded, that one watches while at home on one's own TV?

Does such a video-like equivalent to shortwave radio exist? Yes, it does in the persona of the Slingbox 500 (see photo below), a device one installs in one's home by connecting it to your cable box (or DVR box) and your home's "wi-fi" system. On hooking up this system one goes to www.slingbox.com to establish an account, after which one can watch, while traveling overseas, the same TV programs one would watch at home in real time or recorded. One only needs to hook up one's tablet (or iPad) or smart phone to the Internet, download the Slingplayer app, and press the "start watching" button – and, *voilà*, one can watch anything one would watch on one's cable system at home, and even schedule the DVR to record programs to watch later.

In short, with a Slingbox at home, while I'm traveling overseas, I can watch on my MacBook Pro, Samsung tablet, or Samsung smart phone, any TV program, live or recorded, tunable by my home's DVR. The only bummer in the system is that you get occasional or annoyingly frequent signal buffering to the extent one's wi-fi signal is weak at your overseas location.

Slingbox 500

From Small Screen B&W TVs to Large Screen Color TVs to Smart TVs

One of the biggest areas of technological change in the communication and entertainment industries was the invention of the television (TV) and its continuing evolution from small screen black and white (B&W) tube TVs, to color TVs, to 60" or larger flat panel LCD or LED screens, to the newest innovations, such as Smart TVs that connect to the Internet, 3-D TVs, and curved screen TVs. Our family's first TV, bought circa 1952, was a very small screen B&W TV (see photo below).

Kerry's First TV (1952)

Over the ensuing 65+ years (up through 2016), we went through more TVs than one can shake a stick at, or at least more TVs than I can remember, though I do recall having owned TVs by brands such as RCA, Sony, Sharp, LG, and Samsung. Today, in our small condo, we have large screen TVs in the living room (60" Samsung - see photo below), master bedroom (40" Samsung), and guest bedroom (36" LG), the first two being Smart TVs connected to Blu-ray Players and an Amazon Fire, while the LG has been "converted" to a "Smart TV" by being connected to two "Smart" devices (Sony Blu-ray Player and an Apple TV).

Grandson Braden Watching 60" Samsung Smart TV (2016)

From Letters to Emails & Beyond

When I was a kid in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the way we communicated across town, across the nation, or across oceans was by letter. In those years, a first class stamp cost around 2-3 cents but, over the ensuing 50+ years, the cost of a first class stamp steadily rose by an average of about a penny per year to its current cost of nearly 50 cents.

In 1969, after Sonia and I married and moved to Ames, Iowa, writing letters was the way that Sonia communicated with her and my parents in Colombia, since long distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive. However, in the early 1990s, we purchased two fax machines (Murata M750), one for our home, the other for Sonia's parents, this allowing Sonia and her parents to send letters more quickly to one another.

Indeed, having that fax machine facilitated staying in touch with my dad in the spring of 1993, while he was on a multi-week trip to several African countries. During that period, Sonia and I faxed letters to him about the house we wanted to purchase and possible ways he could help us secure enough cash for a down payment to swing the loan we needed to purchase the house. At times, the fax machine also came in handy in negotiating trades of soundtrack LPs with fellow soundtrack collectors in the U.S. and overseas.

Murata M750 Fax & Phone & Copier Machine

About the time we moved to a new home in July 1993, along came the Internet and our ability to send and receive emails. Previously I used snail mail to send my soundtrack LP want list and "available for trade" list to other collectors in hopes we'd each see something on our respective lists that would be the basis for working out a trade. The ability to communicate by email greatly sped up the process of exchanging information with other soundtrack collectors and working out trades. And, over the years, email has become a very reliable way of staying in touch with others, sharing information about what one has been up to, making inquiries, and even sending holiday greetings.

Today, however, many tech-savvy (and letter-writing averse) people seem to rely on Facebook, Facetime, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and/or Skype to stay in touch, with letter writing having almost gone the way of the dinosaur. Even the younger generation seems to prefer texting to emailing. Children in our primary schools, after learning to write in block letters, may or may not be taught to write in cursive. Over time more and more youth will take "keyboarding" classes to learn how to "type" — perhaps even honing their "texting" skills to be a "touch typist" (the ability to type without looking at the keyboard).

This is a good thing as the next (if there ever was one already) great American novel is not likely to be penned or typed by even the most eloquent Twitter tweeter banging out a 140 characters into an intelligible sentence.

From "Turned On" to "Tuned In"

The information, communication, and entertainment options available in today's "connected" world boggle the mind – and without having to go back to the "turned on" days of the 1960s drug scene! Each passing day brings us more and more "wi-fi" spots for free (or at a nominal charge) outside one's home. This makes it easy to "tune in" to one's favorite websites – from emails and Facebook, to online newspapers and magazines, to a growing number of sources of audio (e.g., Pandora) and video (Netflix and Prime) entertainment – or even away from home staying connected to one's home TV's cable box or DVR via a Slingbox or apps provided by cable service provides such as Comcast and Verizon.

There’s even a “Tune In” app that enables surfing the Internet to listen to, by location or genre, thousands of streaming radio stations around the world. And if programming providers attempt to block one’s ability to use one of those apps to listen to a favorite station or watch a favorite show while overseas, one can often get around this by first loading a virtual private network (VPN) app that mimics your location as being in the United States.

The most recent information and entertainment gadget to enter our home arrived in the wake of the early days of artificial intelligence (AI) in the guise of Amazon’s Echo Dot: “Alexa, what is an Amazon Echo Dot?”

- Echo Dot (2nd Generation) is a hands-free, voice-controlled device that uses Alexa to play music, control smart home devices, provide information, read the news, set alarms, and more
- Connects to speakers or headphones through Bluetooth or 3.5 mm stereo cable to play music from Amazon Music, Spotify, Pandora, iHeartRadio, and TuneIn
- Controls lights, fans, switches, thermostats, garage doors, sprinklers, and more with compatible connected devices from WeMo, Philips Hue, Samsung SmartThings, Nest, and others
- Hears you from across the room with 7 far-field microphones for hands-free control, even in noisy environments or while playing music
- Includes a built-in speaker so it can work on its own as a smart alarm clock in the bedroom, an assistant in the kitchen, or anywhere you might want a voice-controlled computer
- Always getting smarter and adding new features, plus thousands of skills like Uber, Domino's, and more

Amazon Echo Dot 2 (Black)

No sooner than you ask Alexa a question, a pleasant female voice answers it or says “I’m sorry but I didn’t understand the question.” This type of AI already was in the Microsoft operating system (OS) but named Cortana, while her name in Apple’s IOS is Siri. The name of Google’s AI (“Google”) is cute but doesn’t seem as sexy as Cortana, Siri, or Alexa. With Alexa as the newest member of our household, we’re still learning how to communicate with “her” but I yet find it frustrating that Alexa doesn’t understand when I ask: “Alexa, can you do the dishes this evening?”

While a wealth of Gadgets now can deliver Gigabytes of information and entertainment to enrich our lives, and help us to communicate and stay in touch with family and friends, it seems an irony that the time available to enjoy them seems to grow shorter.

Whether it’s a desktop PC, Windows or MacBook Pro laptop, netbook, iPad or tablet, or smart phone or smart watch, in this day and age, each of these gadgets, “tuned” to the appropriate website or right app, enables you to listen to streaming music or watch streaming video.

While one can listen to streaming music by holding one’s smart phone up to one’s ear, the “smart” way to listen is using earphones (wired or unwired – Bluetooth). Of course, it would look ridiculous to listen to music on a tablet, laptop, or PC walking down the street and holding the device’s speaker(s) up to one’s year. Yet, the image of someone walking down the street with a PC on his or her shoulder isn’t too different from that of the image of a teenager in the 1980s walking down the street with a huge “boom box” on his shoulder blasting out disco, rap, or rock ‘n roll music.

Today, however, that teenager and many of the rest of us have our “boom box” hidden in our smart phone, IPod, or MP3 player – and the only clue that one is walking to a beat of a different tune may be the cable connecting one’s music source to the headphone speakers in one’s ears.

Conclusion

Over the preceding pages, we traveled on a 50+ year journey, recalling the technological change in the “gadgets” of our lives (or at least my life) that have expanded our ability to communicate beyond face-to-face interaction and stay informed and entertain ourselves in a myriad of ways from reading books and magazines to staying abreast of the news, listening to music, and watching TV shows, sports, and movies. Perhaps, more importantly, these gadgets provide ways to communicate and stay in touch with one another when face-to-face communication is not possible.

Increasingly, new and improved gadgets have the capacity to move larger and larger gigabytes of data across the Internet and through cable and Wi Fi systems, enabling us to communicate and entertain ourselves in ways only constrained by bandwidth and whether one has the right gadget and software (apps) to handle this gigabyte stream.

Where this technological evolution will take us next is anybody's guess. Already, newer devices are being hyped that pique one's interest, if not also appetite, to upgrade one's in-home or on-the-go (mobile) information, communication, and entertainment system. Advertisements about these new and/or improved gadgets appear daily on Facebook as "Suggested Posts," everything from 3D TVs to curved-screen TVs; Samsung Virtual Reality headsets; Netgear's Orbi Home Wi Fi System; Grace Digital's Internet Home Audio Radio (GDI-SXTTR2); Kwik Charger and other devices to charge your devices faster or while one is one the road; light bulbs with built-in speakers; home security systems one can manage from one's smart phone while on the road; and so many other "new and improved" or at least innovative gadgets yet on the horizon.

Yes, during all these years I was fascinated by – if not hooked on – all these gadgets which, perhaps, would qualify me as a "gadget junkie." But these gadgets always have been a way to keep in touch with "home" or expand the frontiers of what one knows as home.

On the one hand, for so many years, I grew up in a home that had only a few gadgets (e.g., the mail box, a radio with only AM channels, a TV with only a few over-the-air local channels). At various times during my life, home was uprooted – when I was eight years old in 1953 and my parents moved the family from Worthington, Ohio to East Lansing, Michigan; when I was nine years old in 1955 and my parents took me to Europe for the summer of 1955; when I was 18 years old in 1963 and the family moved to Los Baños in the Philippines; when I was 22 years old in 1968 and I went to Colombia to live with my family for a year in Cali Colombia; and when they later moved to New York City in 1975 and to Reston, Virginia in 1983.

During the 22 years (1963-1983) that my parents lived overseas, New York City, or Reston, I similarly moved around for my university studies and later during my professional career. In 1968 I moved from East Lansing, Michigan to Cali, Colombia, to work on a USAID-funded project and live with my parents; in 1969 to Ames, Iowa, to study for a Ph.D. at Iowa State University; in 1970 to Miami, Florida to serve in VISTA and back to Ames in early 1972; in 1975 to Muscle Shoals (later Florence), Alabama to work with the International Fertilizer Development Center, and in 1984, to Reston, Virginia, to begin a job with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

During the ensuing 32+ years living in Reston, we lived in four different homes: first, my father's townhouse for several months until we sold our home in Florence and bought a townhouse in South Reston that we lived in for 9+ years; then for 22+ years in a patio home in North Reston; and since late January 2016, in a condo apartment in Reston Town Center.

And, during all of my work years, I frequently was traveling overseas to more than 50 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Over the years, with all that moving around to new "homes" and overseas destinations, "home" has been elusive, especially with a constant yearning to be able to stay in touch with what is happening at "home." Some of the "gadgets" we now have in the guise of email, LikedIn.com,

Facebook.com, and high school alumni web sites provide ways to stay in touch with family and friends, while gadgets including apps allow one to always, if at times only virtually, be at home. Indeed, as in Perry Como's 1954 Christmas song *Home for the Holidays*, "no matter how far away you roam," "there's no place like home…."

Thus, as an update of 1984's ***To All The Girls I've Loved Before*** **(click on video link above to view and hear Julio Iglesias and Willie Nelson singing this song),** I conclude this essay by sharing *Ode to Gadgets* (see text box next page) in appreciation for all those gadgets that have been so much a part of my (and perhaps also your) life – and that have played (and continue to play) an important role in helping this "gadget junkie" always feel at home even when I'm away from home.

Ode to Gadgets

To all the gadgets I've loved before
That traveled in and out my door
I'm glad they came along
I dedicate this song
To all the gadgets I've loved before

To all the gadgets I once caressed
And may I say, I've held some of the best
For helping me to stay in touch, I owe a lot, I know
To all the gadgets I've loved before

The gigabytes of data were always flowing
Yet at times the data stream was slowing
Thus my gadgets I did often upgrade
To ensure my data streams didn't fade

To all the gadgets that shared my space
That now are in someone else's place
I'm yet glad they came along
I dedicate this song
To all the gadgets I've loved before

To all the gadgets about which I cared
Filled many days with data shared
Their sounds and images live within my being
Those memories will always be a part
Of the gadgets I was tuning

To all the gadgets we've loved before
So many traveled in and out our doors
We're glad they came along
We dedicate this song
To all those gadgets we've loved before

The End







Hooked On Gigabytes: Confessions of a Gadget Junkie

by Kerry J. Byrnes (Okemos High Class of ’63)