

Death by technology: Are you being strangled?

Somebody help me! I want to go back to the '60s! This technology stuff is killing me. A rotary phone and a busy signal, that's the ticket. Ma Bell: she's my gal. No way, no chance of somebody reaching me in the car or, God forbid, on an airplane.



Equity Line
 RICK RICKERTSEN

Simplicity. Doesn't that sound good?

I used to think the advances in electronics technology were a good thing. The early developments were excellent and like most people, I rushed to embrace them. The Walkman, now, that was a great advance. Beethoven in a small, private box you could put on your belt. Your own little world.

FedEx was a good turn with one-day mail and a way to avoid the vagaries of the postal service. The fax machine was a neat step. Instant mail. Progress. But couldn't we — shouldn't we — have stopped right there?

The cellular phone marked the beginning of the end. At first it was so expensive and clunky that few people would use them. Personal intrusions were still rare. We also lurched toward airphones, but that was OK because they rarely worked and cost zillions of dollars per second to use. At least you were still safe from society at 30,000 feet. The peace, while it lasted, was bliss.

In the mid-'90s, life and technology accelerated and things took a turn for the worse. Peace died altogether. In addition to getting overheated with Starbucks rocket-powered coffee, the cell phones got smaller and smaller and cheaper and cheaper!

Now, in addition to caffeine hot flashes we get technology hot flashes. Double latte communication! This was exhilarat-

ing for about six months. We were getting so productive. We were building the killer economy! Tech was king!

Then, people started making cell phone calls in restaurants. Cell phones started going off at the Kennedy Center just as Hamlet was dying. And people walked down every street in Manhattan on a call! Even 8-year-olds now make cell phone calls to their playmates across the playground. Life began spiraling south, cratering. Somebody get me off this ride.

But that was only the beginning. E-mails started hitting the screen and we needed lap-tops at home. We had to get online to buy internet stocks because they were going up 15 percent per minute. We opened day-trading accounts and e-procurement accounts and book-buying accounts and went into digital chat rooms.

Excuse me, I've got to get off this chat line because my cell phone is ringing. Oh, and I've got mail, or is it porn mail or the Melissa virus or the love bug virus? What will that do to my hard drive, soft drive, CD-Rom, CPU, C-drive or DVD? Maybe I can call a technician to ask them which digital connector I should use? But no, there are no human technicians — just busy signals and digital options.

I've got to escape this madness, but first I need to check my on-line wireless Blackberry from RIM to see where my stocks are trading. What? They're down 20 percent in the last 15 minutes? Wait ... this cell phone connection stinks ... oops, call waiting, please hold.

I'm being paged on my Palm Pilot XV and need to hot sync and lip sync and get a drink of coffee cause I'm not revved enough on the T-1 line, broadband wireless DSL, call-waiting digital mail-box instant message.

Please e-mail me, page me or voice mail me at anyone of the 38 numbers or four e-mail addresses listed on my digital uber-address personal website. Oh, no! Somebody stop me!

Soon there will be no need to go anywhere or do anything. You'll order anything and everything on your voice activated online procurement system and see your friends on digital broadband streaming video downloads. You'll have no need to talk to anyone except when you need

help with a failed piece of code, and then you won't be able to reach anyone.

The fact is that all this craziness has made us the most productive group of people in the world running the largest and most robust economy in the world. But we need to ask, "At what price?" Is technology controlling us or are we controlling technology? Do we really have lives anymore?

It's not the first time these questions have been asked, of course. Each time society has taken a leap forward, technologically anyway, there's been a period for taking stock. Each new advance — from agrarian to industrial, from industrial to high tech — brings unforeseen consequences that have to be sorted out and thought through. Maybe we ought to be doing a little more of that today.

When was the last time you just reflected quietly on your existence for a few hours without your Startac on your belt?

I called someone the other day from my cell phone and got a busy signal. At first, I was insulted — the barbarian had no call waiting! Then, I got paged and had two cell phones going at once and realized I longed for the buzz of a busy signal and those old rotary days.

Ignorance, at least in small doses, can be bliss.

When was the last time you just reflected quietly on your existence for a few hours without your Startac on your belt?