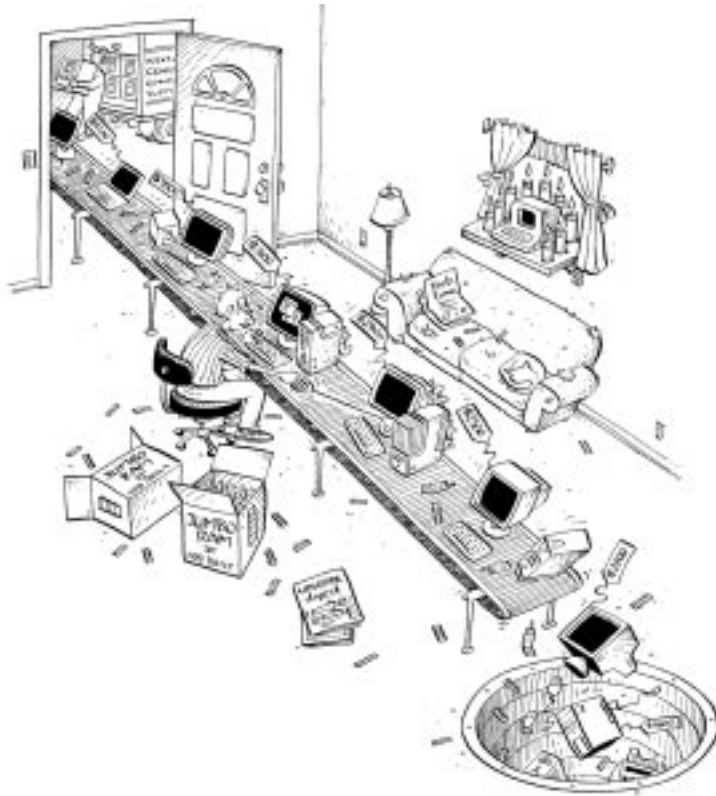


Modern Technology: Milking the Modern Consumer

BY FRED STENSON



In 1980, I told a genius acquaintance that I had bought a computer. I thought he would be pleased. But what he said was, “When I hear that you, a novelist, have a computer, it tells me it’s time to move on.”

I don’t know what that fellow is doing now (maybe implanting memory expansion chips in sheep), but during the last couple of years, I have been project-managing and directing a writing program for the Internet. When he hears that, he will want to move to Jupiter.

As the world becomes more wired, and more technophobes become technophiles, it is probably true that technical geniuses no longer work in something as horse-drawn as conventional computers and the Internet. Which is why, when you or I run into trouble with

our computers, and dial frantically for support, the chap who greets us on the phone (after a delay so long and ad-filled I’m convinced it’s on purpose) is not so much a computer genius as an honest muddler—not unlike ourselves. As in the case of the company which recently seduced me into downloading its (free!) bulky and buggy new browser, so when I am in trouble I can pay \$30 (US) for a few minutes on the phone with a better class of computer geek—but not anyone who will challenge the frontiers of science any time soon.

But still, scary as that is, my inability to solve technical problems

with my computer and software isn’t a patch on having to buy a new one every (increasingly short interval). My first

computer, a notorious piece of crap nicknamed the “Trash 80,” the laughing stock of its day, lasted 10 years. Now, after expending thousands of dollars (to get acres of hard drive, megahertz to burn, and a respectable answer to the personal question “How big is your RAM?”), it will be two years or less before I first hear that my computer is not worth fixing or improving.

“How do you stand this old thing?” the computer guy will ask, and my RAM will feel very small indeed.

Resale value? Zero, but I can give it to a charity that sends old computer gear to the Third World to

limit progress there.

The merchandising principles of the computer appear to have been based on the piggy bank. When you buy a new piggy bank, it works superbly well. Then comes a time when you have to squeeze to get the pennies in. Not long after, it is full and of no use whatsoever. You have to get a new one, and wisdom always suggests you buy a bigger one this time.

If my childhood home filled up with full piggy banks, ever larger, my adult home fills with increasingly powerful but now useless computers. Every one blazed with speed at the outset. I could hardly believe it. Then I began installing and downloading. A couple of word-processing programs, one for taxes, one for photos, one for editing digital video, a few games—and to protect this bounty, a new virus protection program with an automatic updater. Given the speed with which viruses are hatched, identified, and defended against, this program eats up my hard drive faster than most viruses would. (Egad! Maybe my virus protection program is really a very sophisticated virus!)

Anyway, pretty soon, there is my *wunder*-computer plugged solid, unpumpable, ready for the Third World. I'll get a really, really big and fast one this time.

Here the computer-piggy bank analogy fails. Only a fool would move his money from the old piggy bank into the new one. But that is exactly what I will do when my new computer arrives. I will input all my old files and programs and protection devices, so that it begins its life half full.

Back in my days as a student economist, planned obsolescence was a hot topic. The prime criminal example was the automobile. There were new ones all the time, tempting your pocketbook, and the old ones wore out faster than they should. But let me tell you, compared to the builders of computers, car manufacturers are practically benefactors. Though a 2002 BMW

is not equivalent to an '88 Honda Civic, you can still get in an '88 Civic and go where the Beamer goes. If the computer people made cars, this would not be the case. They would not only change the car each year, they would change the highway, and the fuel. They would make sure no garages existed capable of fixing a car more than three years old.

Come to think of it, proof of the truth of this is no farther away than one's local garage. The trusty local mechanic, a genius in his own right upon whom you've always depended, can no longer fix your too-new automobile: the reason being the indecipherability and non-repairability of the computerized devices with which much of it is made.

So look out, folks, the computer people and the car manufacturers are fast becoming one, and the two-year-and-obsolete \$40,000 car can't be far away. Let's call the first one the *Microsoft Flush*. And if those new cars completely replicate the success principles of the computer, they will not break down, not in the conventional sense. There will be some way by which you the owner and driver will break them yourself out of hubris and greed. They will perhaps provide you with free options, your choice. You will love these options and be unwilling to give them up. Others, over time, will prove to be not nearly as optional as they originally seemed. So, when your car won't go more than 50 km/h any more, you will choose to buy a new one, which has all the same options, and a few brand new ones, and goes 200 km/h.

I'll stop now. I sense that I'm about to talk about the telephone. Don't get me started on the telephone. ☐

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 produced films and videos, and eight published books of fiction and non-fiction.