

The ABCs of Technology: Good & Bad



Robert S. Swiatek

**The ABCs Of
Technology –
Good And Bad**

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First Edition

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for those whose lives have been ruined by technology

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Introduction

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

Technology has brought many advances to civilization. Automobiles, telephones, television and computers have made our lives easier, not to mention renewable energy and medical advances. It wasn’t that long ago that the ordinary citizen couldn’t have a book published unless he spent \$4,000 or more. That changed with time as I had my cookbook published in the fall of 2002, thanks to a self-publishing company in Pennsylvania. This was a print on demand venture so I had to pay, but I didn’t need to take out a mortgage. Improvements in the book business have reduced costs even further. My knowledge of cover design, working with various other types of software made the amount spent even less, but I had to do more work.

I added to my education because of all the technology. As a result, many of my books have come into print. The others are ebooks. All my books are free downloads at my web site, which is listed at the bottom of the introduction. I began writing while I was teaching in Binghamton. That book was finally published in early 2012 because of all the revisions. Altogether I taught high school mathematics for eight years before joining the business world as a software programmer. I retired and then became involved with the self-publishing option.

Without the tech of the book business I probably wouldn’t have a web site. My math and computer background played a huge part in organizing and writing books. Besides the culinary treatise, other topics include technology, addictions, the environment, missing intelligence, music, genealogy, my journey as a writer and a novel about the national lottery. I’ve always read a great deal – mostly non-fiction since truth is more entertaining than fiction – and this made my research easier. I’ve never stopped learning or teaching. All good writers need to do both.

I mentioned veracity and I strive for that in every book I’ve written. My aim is to have a minimal number of errors when I publish a book – it’s virtually impossible to catch every mistake.

An individual found my site and felt that the topics I covered were eclectic. There are a few threads there: humor, hope, education, helping others and social justice. My goal from my writing is to have more people read. No one can make excuses since my books are usually short, not epics. Naturally they're political since no true artist can be anything but. I haven't mentioned any of my titles in this book, but you can go to my web site and see what they're all about. The cover and title should give you a clue. Clicking on *information* under the cover of each book will tell you even more.

As in a few of my books, some of the names have been changed to protect the author. These include individual as well as corporate and software names. You should be able to recognize the real appellations from the bogus ones. Actually, when you see a name that's not authentic, feel free to replace it with the name of your favorite software or company.

When I was almost finished writing *The ABCs Of Technology*, I read another related book by Bill Bryson, *I'm A Stranger Here Myself: Notes On Returning To America After 20 Years Away*. Besides this 1999 book, I've read quite a few of his offerings and I recommend them for his research, insight and sense of humor. I've included a few more books in the reference section following the last chapter.

This book is about hope, change, progress, advances, challenges and solutions. Each chapter begins with a quote with the title being either that of a song or words from a song. The last few books of mine also used song titles for each chapter. Here I've tried to make a connection in each of the twenty-six chapters between the topic and chapter title. The considerations are mostly for television, cars, phones and computers. Just as in technology there are so many connections and some topics embrace many aspects, I have more than one chapter to cover the same aspect of tech, even saying a few things about health care.

Many people feel that tech is a big failure. Some individual might say that it has so many bugs that he opened up an exterminating business. Don't tell the IRS about him. Another mentioned that she avoids the stuff since she breaks out in a rash whenever she is near a computer. They seem to be forgetting about all the good. Technology has been around for centuries. Nonetheless, while solving problems, tech has also created others.

I've heard so many complaints about computers, telephones, cars and television that it's obvious that we have to fix what's broken as soon and as much as possible.

bobcooks.com

1. Amy

“There are three roads to ruin: women, gambling and technicians. The most pleasant is with women, the quickest is with gambling, but the surest is with technicians.” – Georges Pompidou

My friend Len told me about *Magic Jack* for phoning others. He mentioned that his nine-year old grandson calls him from the Philippines, and the cost of the calls isn't different from a local call. Another method of contact is *Skype*, which is free with video and can be utilized on most computers. I don't use it and have limited knowledge about it, but a woman I know emailed me that she keeps in contact with her children and grandchildren through *Skype* because she doesn't travel

If you have cable, phone or Internet service, you're probably familiar with Amy. You never dated this creation: the one associated with getting assistance if you *Ask Amy*. I think *she's* a robot whose intelligence is beneath that of a swizzle stick. To convince you of that, here are a few questions I gave her: *How long was the war of 1812? How long did the Thirty Years War last? What? When?* The real answers are: *almost three years from 1812 to 1815; thirty years; Ask someone else. Ask someone else.* Amy's first two answers were: *I am designed to answer questions one sentence at a time.* Her answers for the last two inquiries are the same: *I'm sorry, I didn't get that. Please rephrase your question.*

The next option is trying chat. Here, you're only limited to technical questions. As you can see, Amy isn't that knowledgeable and asking her anything is a waste of time (WOT), which sounds a great deal like the questioner's reply after hearing her answers: *What?* Using chat, an agent might help you out. Suppose his name is Chris. On a few occasions, I had relatively easy problems, but the session wound up taking close to an hour. One was about call waiting on my phone, which I wanted to remove. My idea of that concept is a busy signal. Answering a second call while talking to another person is downright rude, especially if he says he'll call back the second caller, returns to the first with same response, hangs up and then goes to the disco.

I did get instructions for ending call waiting – I was told it could be done through my provider web site or using the phone. Chris cautioned me that there was a problem with the aforementioned site. I made the change through the phone as well as through the site later but still have call waiting on my phone, which I don't want. More recently I did the chat thing and I'll elaborate on getting help in other chapters. Besides Amy, which *works* for a few corporations, and chat, you can also email and phone for help. I wish you luck. I wonder if Chris ever took Amy out to dinner. She won't eat much.

Perhaps chat is more helpful at other web sites, but somehow I doubt it. My credit union has it, but going there I noticed that the help person was also named Amy. Oh, joy! I'm just kidding. Here are the answers Meaghan gave to the first two questions I asked Amy: *Three years? Thirty years?* I asked a technical question of her but I don't have the time to apply what she suggested – I can solve the problem with a workaround, which I'll talk about in a few chapters, mainly in chapter 18.

In today's business world, we have no choice but getting help from companies by these same methods. I doubt that they'll be any more helpful than the chat I've experienced, with the exception of my credit union, but I hope I'm wrong. You may want to check if Amy is moonlighting somewhere else, especially for the airlines. Another option is to read manuals, which I can't recommend. This applies especially to technical write-ups. From my dealing with computers, those documents work if you know what you're doing, but then you wouldn't need them. One of the problems is that manuals are not penned by writers, but by rocket scientists. The Buffalo library web site has a manual that will help you if you are interested in reading ebooks. It's fifteen pages long – much more than I care to read. I'll have to read part of it, though. There are a few other issues on this almost user-friendly library site, so it needs tweaking. I think this is ongoing because I read two ebooks from there without issues and while trying to obtain a third, couldn't download the book even though the site says it's available. The web designer may have rushed to put the site into production, rather than analyze his work first. It probably wasn't his fault but that of a supervisor or technology itself.

Returning to the robot, since Amy doesn't know much and chat has issues, phoning will have you in a voice maze. With a decent site having a knowledgeable web administrator or a company that knows what it's doing, you could get lucky. At times I've experienced the good and bad.

I own two PCs: an electronic reading device (ERD) and a desktop computer. Reading books on an ERD gives you an opportunity to get help. Unfortunately, this corporation doesn't answer emails, at least not mine, so far. They must know about me. When I first used this ERD, it had no instructions, but I could download the manual. If I needed to read it in order to set up Internet access, I could get help from it. Somehow I went around that, using a technique which many people use, which I'll mention later. I soon had a more serious problem. I set up the device but was never asked for a password. I turned off the ERD but later couldn't log on again as it asked for a password. I'm really digressing – chapter 23 is about passwords – but in technology there are so many connections. Returning to the problem, it could be solved in one of two ways: Going to a particular store, which I really didn't care to do, or I could solve the problem with another computer device. All I had was a single gadget, but fortunately my niece Liz came to the rescue.

Returning to the ERD manual, I tried downloading it, but that seemed to require more than a day so I didn't get it. I considered doing a find in the document, but since I didn't have that help document, that was impossible. I didn't surrender and one day I may get the help I need – although I'm not sure what the issue was originally. Isn't technology wonderful?

As expected, from time to time the ERD needs charging. I do that and a few times I see that my reader is 95% charged or even 96%. I stop the charging and turn off the device and sign on later. At that point, I notice that it's 100% charged. The new math must be involved here. Towards the end of January 2015, I charged it again, with the result of 105%. Why didn't it list that number instead of 100% when I turned on the device later? Math has really changed over the years.

We are blessed since our ERDs can read just about any book ever written. You can find ebooks in so many places, many truly free. All we have to do is learn how the device works, which

may involve night school. It may not be that bad but I was reading a book by T. Coraghessan Boyle and was a third of the way through it when suddenly the size of the print changed. I'm not sure how that happened but the ebook wasn't supposed to be in big print. It shouldn't be hard to find the person to contact since the problem is either with the ERD, the Buffalo Public Library or Overdrive. I don't like the latter since no one should read while driving. This might convince you why people would rather read a book the old way. I'm one of them.

A good thing came out of this situation. I called the library and was told how to remedy the snafu. I tried what she said and learned some tech pertaining to the ERD, but it was still in big print. I experimented a bit and behold, I had the book back in standard print size as before. I called the librarian and mentioned the solution. Before communicating with her, I wondered if I could recall how I did it, but I remembered and she thanked me. Later in the week I showed my sister how to modify the print to normal size, but there was a problem. Is that surprising? After more attempts, I could utter, *voila!*

A few months ago I had a new furnace installed. It came with a different thermostat and an accompanying manual. I read the latter and followed the instructions but it seemed that the heating system wasn't working the way it should, or I didn't read the help booklet properly. People do make mistakes. As 2014 turned into 2015, the heating guys were over and I almost asked for a new thermostat. They enlightened me and previously I may not have pressed the right buttons on the regulator. Now everything seems to be working the right way. In the Arctic winter that Western New York and the rest of the nation was experiencing in early 2015, I'm thankful for the visit. As winter turned into spring in 2015, I noticed that the thermostat wasn't completely free of software bugs. A second occurrence in March verified my hunch, but the heating system works well.

Manuals and warranties go together and right along with them is insurance. If you have the latter, you don't need it. Not having it means you should have bought it. When a product breaks down it means the warranty expired a month or two ago. Besides the fact that manuals don't really help, if you need to refer to one, you'll discover that it's gone. On the other hand, a manual that you

own probably won't be needed. The missing manual happened to me in a few cases. When I was out shopping, someone must have broken into my house and stole it. In any case, manuals are much too long, implying that the devices and software may have too many options and are too complex.

What can we do about this help problem? It really shouldn't be *hell*, but *help*. Firing Amy is not an option since she doesn't have a job. She doesn't exist or if so, is a robot, just like the chat creation. In chat, when something responds to your question, *What is the color of my car?* with, *Is your question, 'what is the color of your car?'*, there's no way that the chat thing is alive. Both Amy, who is a virtual assistant who I think is virtually and realistically useless, and the chat robot should be recycled in the metal bin. A company should use real people from the United States with intelligence that truly understand English and have technical knowledge as well. If the phone lines and web sites are jammed with people waiting for answers to questions, it means that the corporation and its products need an overhaul. The system isn't working.

Salesmen and barely trained responders shouldn't work at the help desk. Companies need to be more responsible. Yeah, that'll happen. I'll talk about a site that thinks it knows my name and other ones that need to hire people with computer backgrounds to design them. Sadly, too many corporations have tech issues as well. Humans should be paid to compose the manuals – teachers are a great choice, maybe even Manuel. Chat needs modifications to help customers, not frustrate them. Finally don't hire anyone named Amy unless people in the know interview her.

Pure Prairie League released a song with the title of this chapter on their 1972 album, *Bustin' Out*. It was spelled differently: "Amie".

Paul Peterson had a truly minor hit in 1963 with "Amy". Each song is about love, which none of us feel when trying to obtain help for our computer or for corporate questions.

2. **B**ack up against the wall

“The system of nature, of which man is a part, tends to be self-balancing, self-adjusting, self-cleansing. Not so with technology.”
– E. F. Schumacher

During one of his monologues on the program, *Seinfeld*, Jerry discussed the wedding ceremony, mentioning the words of the minister: *Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?* Note that the question didn't mention the groom's name. All the men in the bridal party were spiffy in their tuxedos. If for some reason the guy about to be married backed out and didn't appear at the church, why couldn't the best man stand in and marry the bride. A great deal of planning took place and money was spent to get to this point, so why waste any of it? I've wondered why the bride didn't wed the groom's buddy in the first place since he was the best man. This approach is nothing more than one of backup.

The backup thing has been employed by women for some time. Mary and John are almost engaged but Mary senses that John, based on his behavior, could abandon her. From time to time she goes out with Tom as well as with Ron. This is her backup action. It never hurts to employ one since they seem to be a good thing.

In the world of technology, backups are a good idea too. For my desktop computer, I try to do them every six months. There's nothing worth saving on my ERD – probably not even the device – so I don't bother with backups. At first files were saved to tapes and floppy disks – those that actually flopped and then the smaller ones that didn't. Now you can copy files to other devices, such as CDs and flash drives. I understand that a cloud could be used, but not for me since I'm scared of heights. When used, there were problems with either type of floppies. Using CDs improved matters, but not all the time.

Sometime in late 2014, I needed a file from my backup taken at the end of 2013. When I opened it up, the only files listed were JPEGs, mostly photos. I had saved my number crunching files and word processing files, so I wondered where they went. Since I usually copy files to one CD and then another, there is a

CD in my car that might have all the files I backed up. At least some of the files were on that jpeg CD, but more than once my backup CD was void of data completely. I wonder if they went to the same place that the spots on pinto beans go after cooking. Checking the properties of the CD, it showed no files using up zero space with no space available. Since I can't put any data on these blank devices, the CDs are ready to be recycled since they're all CD-R, meaning read only. Had it been CD-RW, I could have cleared it and wrote data to it – for a while anyway. I should mention that contrary to what shouldn't happen, I copied data to one CD-R, read it and later could write to it. Maybe it was a CD-RW after all.

It appears that the backup idea doesn't work every time. Fortunately the business world is better at the process. That's what I thought until the middle of the 1980s. Despite all precautions, even the best intentions can result in major screw-ups. At the time, I worked in the software department full time for a computer company in Syracuse. My assignment was that of a consultant without commensurate pay. I quit the company after about a year and a half when I saw that there seemed to be no future in this business. While I was in their employ, I was asked to create a purchase order system for a department in a local corporation. I was given two options: modify an existing system that the consulting company had or write one from scratch. I was specifically directed to determine my approach with some analysis, so I set forth and discovered that using what was there would have required more time and effort. Nonetheless, my boss insisted that I use the existing purchase order system rather than starting from scratch – that wasn't a good idea.

I should have created the system my way and not told a soul about it but instead I foolishly did as told. This approach is acting now and apologizing later if necessary, as opposed to obtaining permission to proceed. The result was that my boss complained when it took longer than he wanted me to spend. Whose fault was that? Eventually the project was complete and the effort was top-notch. The clients were pleased as punch – whatever that means. They used what I produced and couldn't have been happier with my creation, including the user, with whom I worked closely.

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