

THE DIGITAL DERIDE

United Media Syndicated Column

April 19, 2001

It's no wonder to me that the current economy is called by some "a tech wreck." Maybe we can fix it. Take a test and ramble a bit. Are these headlines heartening or disheartening?

The first reads "Dullsville.com: Net's boo-o-ring" (Los Angeles Daily News on April 13, 2001.) The second, in "Laptop" magazine, is "Digital Cameras -- Who Needs Them?" ("Laptop," that is, not "Lap Dancing.")

My own reactions to them were mixed. First was rapture, unadulterated in one case, adulterated in the other.

The Internet headline spoke directly to the essence of my soul. It meant that I am not an idiot, not missing the world going by. I reveled in the fact that a survey from collegeclub.com said that almost half of the respondents were less enamored of the Net than in the past. I was pleased to learn that only about 20 percent of the patrons of "LuLu's Beehive," a cyber cafe in Studio City, Calif., log on, as opposed to 30 to 35 percent just a year or so ago.

Alas, the digital world is driving me craaaaaazy. (Press one to find out more; this call may be monitored.)

I now have satellite television from Direct TV. I had it installed because I couldn't get Fox News Channel on my Starpower cable service in Washington. But now I can hardly get the Orioles, even if I pay extra money for a Fox sports channel, because the game was blacked out, even though the O's were playing out of town. I don't know what I'm talking about.

Press two. It took me two hours of pressing one and pressing two, and trying to fake being a rotary phone, in order to confirm a United Airlines electronic ticket. I have been told by a friend to always press the option about "billing." That one they answer.

I was happy, but less happy, with the headline about digital cameras. Why less happy? Because I had already bought one. Why buy one? Because I lost my old point 'n' shoot, because my brother-in-law Gene said "digital technology is ready" and because Gene has been sending me fantastic prints, which he juggles on Adobe Photoshop. I could easily do the same, he said.

I have had a great deal of difficulty setting the date on the camera on my Kodak digital, let alone "capturing" a picture, or understanding the purpose of "review," "connect" and "preferences." Yes, I read the manual -- part of it. I did not understand that a plug-in and a CD were needed to put the diskettes of pictures on your computer, which would mean pressing "Install." Pressing "Install" rarely works for me. For example, I bought a wireless mouse -- very convenient! -- but the guy from my office had to come to my apartment to press "Install" for me.

In any event, I am not getting fantastic pictures. And I have remembered an important fact: Gene was a professional photographer and always took wonderful pictures.

I could go on. I bought an elementary "organizer" a few years ago, just for calendar and to-do lists. What could be simpler? I followed every direction and was unable to enter a single phone number. Perhaps this is genetic. I remember my late father, a very smart man, wrestling with a small Dixie cup of ice cream, trying to

figure out how to pull the lid off.

© 2000, *Newspaper Enterprise Assn.*

So I hate it all, right? I want it all to go away, the Internet and all the other new-fangled stuff. No, I do not. In the old days I did reporting on a typewriter and wrote books and columns by hand. I resisted word processing for years. Now I wonder how I ever could have written without it. I shuffle paragraphs, sentences and phrases around until I think they work, and all my finished pieces are on my hard drive, easily accessible. It even helps with my spelling. And how could I live without e-mail?

So I don't hate it all. I'd better not. I had occasion recently to sit with a small group asking questions of the CEO of one of the leading Internet hardware companies. I asked him, "How's business?" Short term is lousy, he said. But long term, fantastic, he said, do you think they're going to stop building out the Internet? Of course not. (What does "building out" mean?)

If they stopped all this stuff, the stock market would fall further. I certainly don't want that to happen. Half the American public owns stock, most of them in some of these press-one companies, including me. Many millions are employed by them, directly and indirectly. So I wish those tech people good fortune. But I wish they would make it easier on us. Maybe then those tech wreck stocks would rebound.

And by the way, you can write me at watmail@aol.com, find out what I'm up to at <http://www.aei.org> and learn about my public television show at <http://www.pbs.org/thinktank>. Yeah, I'm wired, but I'm not happy.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and is the moderator of PBS's "Think Tank."