

How Technology Has Affected My Life



Many of us think of technology in scary terms - the age of the machine, man vs. machine, depersonalization, computerization, artificial intelligence. Hal the computer taking over in "2001, a Space Odyssey", or Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone" series. We believe things and machines do get revenge, at our expense. We kick tires (and some of us now kick computers) and we talk to our possessions. Are we showing it (them) who's boss or beating it up or both? Does it work? Many of us think so.

My family history is loaded with technology. My father says it's genetic. My siblings and I fight over my father's tools, not my mother's crystal or household furnishings. Whenever he comes to our houses, projects pop up and we have new Rube

Goldberg devices all over our homes. Cartoonist Rube Goldberg is famous for his convoluted but workable devices - he practically made a living by spoofing technological inventions. His is a household name to us. We all roll our eyes at our father's absurdity but jealously guard all the Rube Goldberg devices our father has made for us. They work. They may seem silly, but they work.

"My family history is loaded with technology"

This may be a reason I'm not afraid of my camera and know how to unjam paper from the duplicating machine. But is this technology?

What is technology anyway? Is it machines? Is it the wheel? Or computers? Or Raid? The dictionary defines it as applied science as opposed to pure science. But technology is also medicine and airplanes and voice mail and guns. It's inventions and devices. Even Rube Goldberg devices.

To ask how technology has affected my life is almost absurd - I don't know of any material aspect of my life not affected by technology. How, in reality, could anyone today live without technology? Any technology. We'd have no hoes, no fishing poles, no spears, no clothes, no needles for sewing, no wheels.

I am reading a book called *Technology and The Revenge of Unintended Consequences: Why Things Bite Back* by Edward Tenner. In this book he relates the story of how the term "Murphy's Law" came to be part of our language—"If something can go wrong, it will." Tenner believes this to be a cautionary tale, a call to attention that technology is a process, that we must be flexible and refine or adapt as we go along. It sounds like my father talking. Murphy was a scientist working on the affects of deceleration with another scientist, and after a particularly dangerous test they went to look at the results and there weren't any because the gauges were installed backwards. Unintended consequences. This event, among others, contributed to our desire to "fool-proof" everything (make a gauge that can be installed only one way) or make caps to keep children out of bottles and then find only children can open them.

I have a friend who had a 4-wheel drive pickup truck and she and a friend went to Mesa Verde. It had been a rainy season so they were alert to flood warnings and muddy roads. But it had been dry for a couple of days and the dirt roads were once again hard-packed. They took a short cut; it was late, night, and they wanted to get home. The road was marked (with green and white highway destination signs) so they figured it was relatively well-traveled. They drove a couple of miles on pavement and then the dirt road began. And then they got caught in mud. They drove on, they had 4-wheel drive, after all. Mud and snow tires. In the middle of the Apache Indian Reservation, in an oil field with those machines that look like praying mantises pumping - no lights of habitation, no humans. Stuck in the mud in the middle of the night with 4-wheel drive. They had to scoop the mud off the tires with camping spoons and their fingers. It took them 5 hours to get back to solid ground. Some short cut. Four-wheel drive is great, but someone laughed at this story saying, "Yeah, 4-wheel drive gets you stuck further in." An unintended consequence. We feel safer so we put ourselves in greater danger.

How many of us believe that machines and appliances have minds of their own and that we humans must accommodate, bend to the machine's way of doing things? Oh, you just have to twist that lock a little, well, push the key a little to the left and shove on the door while twisting - it's easy, it'll open right up. We believe in gremlins, glitches, bugs, and lemons.

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Rube Goldberg devices are superb examples of successful adaptation. They are funny, fairly complex, but ultimately harmless devices - that work! I have a fire place damper that slips closed too easily. So, my father wrapped copper around the handles to create loops for a hook that was attached to a piece of yarn that was attached to a tin can that held a heavy door stop. Now, when I build a fire, I hang the hook from the loop on the damper handle and move the can to just the right place that holds the damper open the way I want. It's funny, it's awkward, it's complex, and it works.



I asked Jayel, my father's honey, if he had built any Rube Goldberg devices recently, and she burst out laughing. She says his favorite materials are non-skid cloth and barge cement. I said "Excuse me. Barge cement?" That was a new one on me.

Apparently he bought a pair of \$50 leather slippers and his feet kept slipping out. Now it's important to understand that his feet kept slipping out when he was walking backwards and he considered this a major problem. Why he was doing this and why it became a problem is another story entirely. So he put non-skid material into his slippers with barge cement because it will stick even in the presence of moisture. It worked.

His most recent invention was built so he could smoke and travel with Jayel who doesn't want to be around smoke. He calls it adaptation. I call it a high speed chimney in his Mercedes. He took an old vacuum cleaner hose and attached Velcro at strategic places to keep it where he wants it, and attached it to the frame of the sunroof with a notched piece of hard plastic tubing. A small piece of the flexible vacuum cleaner hose sticks out the sunroof and the longer piece (why do I think of an elephant's trunk?) dangles into the car (held where you want with Velcro) and its flexibility lets you maneuver it at will. The wind created by traveling at highway speed draws the smoke and debris from the car. Jayel says it cleans ashtrays at 55 mph and pulls out clods of dirt at 70.



My father thinks this trait -- call it technological resourcefulness or appreciation of technology, or adapting-is genetic. His grandfather made a fortune dredging California's rivers for gold (which had been washed downstream in almost powder form from the hydraulic mining done years before). He had read about a barge that dug the Chicago drainage canal - an endless chain of buckets which could then dump the debris on the side of the canal (not back into the dredged channel). He was a rancher in Northern California and had estimated the amount of gold in the river sand (by the color, among other things). He went into business with a company that knew how to pull the gold out of the sand and voila. It worked.

At a recent family reunion all the groceries and luggage were hauled upstairs to the deck of my cousin's house with a bucket, a rope, and a pulley. No one carried anything up the stairs. Adaptation. Unintended consequences. Genetics. And Humor.

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