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The PC Turns 25 — A Revolutionary Anniversary

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Declarations of social revolutions are often overblown. After all, the technological advances of the last two centuries include everything from the harnessing of steam engines to the promise of nanotechnology. Nevertheless, the 25th anniversary of the IBM personal computer (known almost universally as the “PC”) is a landmark worthy of thoughtful consideration.

As *The Times* [London] recalled Saturday:

On this day in 1981 — the year Ronald Reagan entered the White House and Margaret Thatcher stunned Britain by raising taxes — IBM launched the 5150, a machine boasting a 4.77Mhz processor (about 650 times slower than today’s PCs), up to 256kb of memory (about 8,000 times less than today’s PCs) and an optional floppy drive with 160kb of capacity (barely enough for a Word document).

Further:

The IBM PC was not the first personal computer: the Apple II came out in 1977 and the Atari 800 in 1979, but both used proprietary components and failed to develop sales into the mass market.

In contrast, IBM used an Intel processor and Microsoft software, essentially allowing rival companies to clone its product. This move was a result of IBM simply being in a hurry, rather than any grand strategy.

“The original desktop PC was a long way from the user-friendly devices we use today,” said Keith Jones, the managing director of PC World — citing research showing that about a third of Britons say that the PC is the one technological innovation that they could not live without, beating the mobile phone and the washing machine. “Compared with today’s models, the original PC had marginal productivity benefits. But those products sowed the seeds of a revolution,” he said.

Industry analysts estimate that the one billionth PC was sold in 2002. The 2 billion mark should be reached sometime this year. By any measure, the PC has transformed the way we work, think, communicate, handle information, entertain ourselves, and perform a myriad of everyday tasks.

The PC dominates the computer market, even as its rival technologies (each claiming a corps of fanatical users) claim only a small fraction of total computer sales. The vast majority of those reading this weblog will do so on PCs and the most software products intended for mass sales are based on the PC platform.

In less than three decades, the PC has transformed life as we know it. In reality, the PC has become a necessity for those involved in academia, government, business, and social affairs. The development of the Internet has increased our dependence on the PC by a quantum factor. Human rights groups now speak up access to a computer and the Internet as a basic human right.

Of course, all this comes with a cost. The PC is an essentially solitary technology, at least in terms of the user, the keyboard, and the screen. The PC has allowed many individuals to withdraw from the larger society and to inhabit “virtual” worlds. Privacy concerns, dependence on technology, and social isolation all emerge as issues without a quick or easy solution.

The 25th anniversary of the PC reminds us of the role technology plays in our lives. The generation, Bill Gates calls “Generation E” cannot imagine life without the PC and its related technologies. Even those of us old enough to remember a time before this revolution realize that our lives have been changed in remarkable ways by this one single invention. There is no going back.

This anniversary also challenges Christians to think anew about the role of technology in our own lives, churches, and ministries. There may be a fine line between the eager embrace of a technology and a form of technocratic idolatry. On the other hand, the PC revolution has also opened incredible doors for witness, teaching, and publication. After all, the Internet now penetrates even those in the grip of totalitarian regimes.

The late Jacques Ellul warned that modern persons find technology irresistible, and that the motivation to embrace all new technologies was written into the very fiber of modern societies. As he noted, “Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity.”

In Ellul’s view, this was a profound dehumanization that was particularly dangerous for Christians. This is perhaps a good warning as we mark the anniversary of the PC –and read about it on the Internet.

NOTE: IBM offers a very interesting online exhibit of the PC and its development [here](#).

