

Computer...Gadget, Gizmo, 'Personal Confuser' or Cultural Necessity
By Steven Milbrandt

The computer, once only a curiosity accessible to the privileged few – the elite who not only had access to the giant rooms that held the behemoths of the dawn of the 'computer age' but also had the specialized knowledge to make them work, has now become an essential part of society. The computer, once regarded by some as a "passing fad", has pervaded our culture in ways no one could have imagined twenty-five years ago. Early adopters saw its potential and made history. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and others in those early years helped shape the microcomputer that we know today.

The first computers were large. Indeed, they were housed in huge rooms, had very small memory capacities by today's standards, and were very expensive to operate. "Univac 1". The first commercially available computer in the United States was delivered to the U.S. Census Bureau on March 31, 1951. It consisted of 5200 vacuum tubes, weighed 29000 pounds, ran on 125 kW of electricity and took up 35.5 square meters of floor space

By comparison, the personal computers of today occupy only a small area of desk space and have much larger memory capacities and functions due to technological innovations, vastly improved manufacturing processes and perhaps more importantly, the invention of the microchip. Printed circuit boards and microchip technologies have given way to the computers of today.

Computers have become such a mainstay in our "modern" society that businesses cannot even transact commerce if the computer goes down. A computer down means more than lost revenue. Productivity suffers and those things dependant on computers for their operation, cease to function. Traffic systems, urban infrastructure of all sorts and vehicles for transportation on the ground and in the air all now require a computer to properly operate, and, in most cases, operate at all.

Our desire for convenience comes at the price of technology. With all these interconnected dependencies, it is virtually impossible to break free now. Some would say, "Why would you want to?" while others ask, "What have we created for ourselves and where will it end?"

Whatever computers are and are not, it seems clear that for better or worse, they have become a cultural necessity by our own design therefore society must assume responsibility for where the computers takes us in terms of benefit and consequence. Let's hope that is something we are prepared to live with.