At Brunning: People and Technology

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The Last of the Blackberry

“History, like love, is so apt to surround her heroes with an atmosphere of imaginary brightness.” — James Fenimore Cooper, the Last of the Mohicans

Many people like their Blackberry phones. Crackberry addiction is hard to overcome. If you’ve ever typed on a Blackberry keyboard, the ones with real keys and an extremely smart and learning spell checker, well, a virtual one will never feel right. Kinetic memory fades slowly like riding a bike.

The lesson of Blackberry is that technology and love and lust of technology do not endure. Our own behavior should confirm this. Right now we fit from one instance of an iPhone to the next. Momentarily we may be excited by the new car feel of version six and we have that fleeting sense we are ahead of the curve. Yet suddenly, the curve is in our rear window.

The new Blackberry smartphones can do everything an iPhone or Android phone can. They have the touch screen and cover the important apps found in any other operating system. And one model has the real keyboard.

In my office drawer I have my collection of Blackberries. There is the huge 7250 that resembled a Star Trek communicator. The first people around our university to have these were male administrators. They loved this technology that gave them a phone and email in stride. At times they may want to have beamed themselves out of meetings, elsewhere. Why else wear it on a holster like Captain Kirk?

Next in line was one of the “SureType” 7100 series with dual character keys for rapid typing. You navigated the color desktop-like screen with icons with three movement keys. The Pearl or 8100 series simplified screen movement with a small rolling and clickable ball. The “pearl” bought a mouse role to the non-touch screen that simplified moving around and clicking on application icons.

Now this was an elegant and neat phone. Light, compact, it was a flip phone without the flip. It fits now as it did then secure and precise in my palm. True the screen was tiny, too small for the photos and movies we might want to watch, but who wouldn’t want to slip your phone into a front pocket or hidden purse sleeve? Simply smooth…

My last and best Blackberry, the Curve (8330 series), included the pearl — now black — and enlarged and widened the earlier Pearl series to provide more screen and better web features. Throughout the decade RIM aka Blackberry reduced its size while reaching out to “do everything” the computing world of smartphones were heading to.

We’ve known for some time this didn’t work and Blackberry has spent the last five years in decline. They changed their name, they developed new operating system, they’ve innovated a surprisingly smart and versatile tethered tablet. And just as the market was telling Blackberry to quit — they released two new handsets, the Q10 for real keyboard lovers and the Z10.

If everyone had a free day with these new Blackberries, other factors (data plans, providers, discounts aside) it’s a good bet Blackberry would be less in the dumpster than it is. Both are great telephones for talking and each keeps Blackberry’s expertise at enterprise secure email (and increasingly Web data, social media security) with smartphones that swipe and type with ease.

Blackberry’s history is likely that of any in information technology. It’s entwined with success, fear of ruining a good thing with change, and the inevitable end of a good thing. The amazing thing it still is good but our minds are elsewhere.

Disclosure. I own an iPhone 5, iPad 3rd Generation, and an old 4GB Nano iPod. I would like a larger Mac Pro with a big display but frankly I can’t afford it. Equally frank, I would really know what to do with it after many years plunking and mousing on Windows. My iTunes on the Windows computer doesn’t really work and, although I like iCloud, it zaps battery life from all my iProducts connected to the cloud. So most of the time my devices are being charged — to power outlets and my Amex. I don’t use social media as much as I probably should: if FB could be implanted in my brain and I could friend you just by thinking of you, I’d consider it if Medicare would pay for it when I’ve passed from .edu to .gonefishing. For this last piece I genuinely regret not saving all my cell phones from 1994 to .gonefishing. For this last piece I genuinely regret not saving all my cell phones from 1994 to .edu to .gonefishing. For this last piece I genuinely regret not saving all my cell phones from 1994 to .gonefishing.

Perhaps honesty is too severe a demand to place on a search engine. It is, after all, not human. Still it is making human-like decisions, or how does that driverless car amble around the sunshine state?

I’ll admit I use Wikipedia as much as any other Google user. Good or bad, it has consolidated knowledge posted on the Web into a convenient, if bland and tone-deaf description, of stuff you want to know. Google now even grabs a little of the ready-reference content and formats it in its organic search results. It’s eye-catching, this suggestively visual estimate of Wikipedia knowledge.

It’s so, well, driverless. What it is, is search by wire. You’re inputting data, usually simple words that you understand stand in for the answer or information you seek. The wheels for your words spin or more accurately they’ve already been spun billions of times by others. Out spills results Google wants for you especially information that sells you something.

Our understanding of what our users want is informed by some surveys by our pollsters like OCLC, Summon, Ithaka Group, or that odd barometer, Libqual. We read the younger our users are, the more they just want to “google it.” Hey, google is the most active verb in library research!

Any good reporter or investigator follows the money. Our analogue: follow the wire. When a student opens Google to “research,” the invisible hand takes over. Just a few words will do it because the wheels will turn and the click records tally the score and, like magic, the student will get what millions of other students over the years have gotten. Mostly a supply of term paper sites with links to papers posted by similar students for similar or even the same courses.

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Now at New York University’s Shanghai Campus, about 99.9% of the materials immediately accessible by our students and teachers are digital. Certainly the first trend, new technologies expand and limit who has access to information is correct in our case. Our students can enjoy the opportunity to access nearly a million volumes of eBooks, tens and tens of thousands of academic journal titles, have excerpts of millions of other books scanned for them from NYC, and can electronically place requests for other books to be delivered from the home campus using a courier service. Because of this, we are cognizant of our need to make sure our students are trained to take full advantage of all these information riches. I am still not so sure about the second trend about online education bringing about an end to traditional forms of education. In China, at least, there is an enormous amount of online education (my 2001 dissertation focused on the library and information needs of the hundreds of thousands of Television University students in China), but they clearly want flesh-and-blood teachers and are willing to pay premium fees to get them.

With all the news about Edward Snowden and NSA snooping into databases, and the amount of time and effort spent in some countries of the world to control access to information, I don’t think I need to say much about the boundaries of privacy and data protection, the

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