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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Brave new electronic world

I n Joan and Robert Morrison's oral history "From Camelot to Kent State" (Oxford 2001), the voices of 59 men and women enable us to live through the social and political upheavals of the United States in the 1960s.

We first are reminded what life was like in our country before the Peace Corps, the Montgomery bus boycott, the assassinations of JFK, RFK and MLK, the Vietnam War, race riots, women's libera- tion, the Great Society, moon landings, miniskirts and hardhats. No birth control pills, no legal abortions, no special prosecutors, no "Silent Spring".

In the South, segregated schools, segregated lunch counters, segregated buses. Three national networks of commercial television. But the Morrisons' catalog of what was missing before the '60s begins "no Xeroxes."

Professors who came of age in or before the '60s tell students that there was a time when we read articles in scholarly journals in the library, taking notes with pen or pencil, or even committing many of the ideas in those articles straight to our own fallible memories. Most of us can resummon the distinctive chemical smell and oily feel of early photocopies — before Xerox Corp. put the Greek xeros "dry" in photoduplicating. Faster and cheaper and higher quality methods of photoduplicating have changed all that. In most uni- versity departments the copying machine has come to resemble a watering hole for grazing animals, where one academic ruminant can socialize briefly with an- other, while graduate students photocopy whole books, staff members photocopy stacks of adminis- trative documents, and professors photocopy sylla- buses and reading material for their courses, before taking them to copy shops for mass photoduplication as course packets.

What we might call the High Xerox Period in higher education, in government, in the corporate world (1975-2000) is now phasing out as the overlapping Proto-Desktop Period (1985-2000) has developed into High Desktop. The personal computer began making serious inroads into academic life in the early '80s. An easy way for senior professors to become objects of wonder is to mention offhandedly to students that they wrote their dissertation or first book "before we had computers." Some scholarly stalwarts, like James Magnuson, director of the James A. Michener Center for Writers at The University of Texas at Austin, still acquire carpal-ulnar tunnel syndrome the old- fashioned way, by writing out true manuscript ver- sions of work in progress.

We were told in the '80s that computers were labor-saving devices that would free up time to think, teach and do research. We were told computers were economical, and major computer manufacturers made sure that they were. They distributed computers and software to faculty members at discount prices, emu- lating the time-tested marketing techniques of drug dealers standing outside school playgrounds.

Fifteen years later, professors have to format and edit their own articles, reviews and books and master what are euphemistically called improvements in the latest updates of word-processing programs. Journals in my specialized field of prehistoric scripts, lan- guages and cultures still require authors to send hard copies, and they ask for electronic files in MicroSoft Word 5.0 or 5.1, acknowledging that later versions are virtually useless for their purposes.

Meanwhile the portions of annual operating budgets for departments, colleges and college libraries devoted to computer resources have steadily increased at the expense of books, journals and human beings. Why bring in visiting scholars for lectures or seminars when students and faculty can "get information" from them via e-mail and the World Wide Web? Web sites proliferate and their frilled-up, hyper-commercialized complexity makes us buy more powerful computers, faster Internet links and more sophisticated software. Lastly, overheated photocopy machines, large paper- recycling bins, enormous water consumption at chip-manufacturing plants and spiking electricity consumption all tell us that computers have not been harbingers of noisy springs.

My computer lets me hear live recordings down- loaded from www.bobdylan.com. But I also have heard it singing "A Bicycle Built for Two," and it sounds a lot like Hal in Kubrick's "2001."

Palaima has developed carpal tunnel syndrome from writing and editing books, articles, reviews, course notes, op-ed piec- es and too many e-mails on his personal computers. He can be reached at tpalaima@earthlink.net.