

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 163: Death of the Computer

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Well, sometimes I feel the need to “wax philosophical”, and this is one of those times. I am seeing a trend that is changing the way we compute, and it will definitely lead to the death of the computer as we know it today.

Laptops have already outpaced desktops. Back in 2000, laptops were only 25% of all computer sales. This past May, laptops sales had risen to 54% of all computer sales, outpacing desktops for the first time in history. It is not hard to see why this trend has emerged. Laptop prices have gone down considerably, and they are just more convenient for many users. Their built-in batteries not only make them more portable in the home or outside it, the batteries also keep the units going if there is a power failure. Several years ago, I switched our Ozaukee Radio Club Field Day logging network to all laptops for just that reason. If the Field Day generators go down for refueling or whatever, the laptop logging computers just keep chugging along and there is no danger of data loss. My home Winlink station, on 24/7, also uses a laptop for this reason. The rest of the equipment (rig and TNC) is on a UPS that keeps it all going for a while even when the lights go out. Laptops screens have also improved greatly in the recent past, and one can always plug in a desktop monitor to a laptop to improve size and readability even more. So, I think it is plain to all that the boxy old desktop will continue to decline in sales and use, even in the corporate world. But it may well not be the laptop that replaces it.

Another emerging technology that threatens the single use “computer” of the past is the smart phone. These gadgets can now do any communications task that a computer can do and more – voice communications, email, texting, and social networking on Facebook, Twitter and the like. Many models can also shoot still photos and video, play music, perform GPS functions and some have multiple-axis motion sensing (the ones that keep the picture horizontal even when you rotate the phone), which is useful in some games and other apps. Some can show you web videos, and we have all seen TV ads touting smart phone “apps” counting into the thousands. One of our ORC members logs into his Echolink machine with his phone, and has talked through it to hams in Europe. The amazing thing is that the cost of smart phones is so low – many are well under \$300.

Tablet computers are no slouches, either. These are generally larger than smart phones, often with 9 to 10 inch screens. They cost more, too, ranging from around \$300 to \$800. Some offer as much as 64 Gb of storage for videos, magazines, books or whatever. Tablets can do pretty much anything a smart phone can do, which means they can do pretty much anything a regular desktop or laptop can do.

So, we are seeing the emergence of a do-it-all gadget. Call it a smart phone or tablet, or use the old term Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The point is, whatever it is called, it will do everything. Get your email while you are catching lunch at McDonalds, plug it in to a big monitor when you get home to compose a document, watch a U-Tube video while sitting on the throne, listen to music before you hit the sack, etc. Just one device that does it all, and it will be with you 24/7. Many folks have it already and hundreds more are getting it every hour. The thing we call a computer today will soon be obsolete and gone.

What is the next step beyond that? The device will be implantable. There will be nothing to carry around. It will be under the skin of your arm. Happy Computing!