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Predictions, Perceptions and Protestations

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We have completed another revolution around the sun from an arbitrary starting point, and so begins a new year. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the year 2015 seemed like a far-off and futuristic time. I imagined back then that in 2015 people would live in space (true for the ISS astronauts) and other planets (not true for humans, but at least we can drive our RC cars on Mars). Power would be clean (at least we are improving), abundant (true) and cheap (at least gas prices are way down right now). It seemed when I was young that nuclear power would be the solution to our future energy problems, but it unfortunately had problems of its own. I had imagined that by now we would be living a wonderful, Jetsons-like life with no strife and endless possibilities. Oh well; at least we've got smart phones and selfies.

Now 15 years into the new millennium, we don't seem as technologically advanced as I'd hoped we'd be. We do have all-electric cars, but we can't, due to speed limits and traffic, get to our destinations any faster. Air travel is safer (so long as you stay off Malaysia Airlines), more reliable and less expensive (relative to typical wages), but you can't fly any faster. In fact, commercial air travel in the previous millennium was faster due to the Concorde. A lot of people do have robots at home, but they are mostly like the timid floor-cleaning Roomba my mother has, not C-3PO, R2-D2 or the robot in "Lost in Space". Our medical technology has improved greatly, with CT scans, MRI and DNA sequencing, but we still get colds and the flu. We don't yet have a "tricorder" handheld medical scanner like in Star Trek, but with the Qualcomm Tricorder X Prize as incentive, we might not be waiting too much longer. We don't have Star Trek phasers, but the U.S. Navy is preparing to field ship-based laser weapons. We don't have Star Trek holodecks, but we do have Oculus VR headsets and some basic telepresence devices. We don't have Star Trek replicators, but we do have 3D printers.

We don't yet have my favorite Star Trek technology, transporters, but we do have their communicators, in the form of cell phones. Our smart phones are actually more capable than any handheld device Captain Kirk had. The Internet and our computers provide an informational resource that was unimaginable when I was a child. The same information that Warren Buffet or Al Gore can get off the Internet is also available to a relatively poor call center worker in Bangalore and to a political dissident in China. Unfortunately, while we have so far managed to avoid nuclear war, we are presently fighting on the cyber battlefield with North Korea and other foreign governments, as well as criminals.

Where will technology take us in 2015? I didn't make any predictions last year in my column, so I have no crystal ball errors to answer for now. I might as well make a few technology predictions for 2015.

1) Computer sales will be up in 2015, while tablet sales will be flat or down compared to 2014. I'm still using Windows XP at work, so there are probably a lot of companies out there like mine that will be looking to upgrade and possibly buy new computers when Windows 10 is released mid-year. On the flip side, I think almost everyone that wants a tablet has one now, and upgrades are not that compelling.

2) The paperless society is still a long way off. While we are doing a lot to reduce the amount of printed material we use, it won't be going away in 2015. While I see more coupons, offers and deals being redeemed on smart phone screens by shoppers, I still have to buy new printer ink cartridges a couple of times a year. I've been offered email receipts from some hotels and other merchants, but some merchants are going the opposite direction with their receipts. I recently received an Albertsons grocery receipt for a single item that was 11 inches long (5.5 inches of useful receipt and the rest useless advertising and customer survey solicitations). A recent CVS receipt for one item was 26 inches long (5 inches of receipt and 21 inches of coupons). It seemed like a lot of wasted paper.

3) Streaming video will be up but views on small screens will be down. People still don't want to watch movies on tiny screens. Fortunately devices like Google's Chromecast and Amazon's Fire TV enable streaming if your TV can't. Watching video on a smart phone or tablet might be good if you fly, ride in a car (not drive) or take public transit a lot, but I'd rather watch at home on a big screen if possible.

I'm dreaming of an iChristmas

My wife traded in her Nokia Windows phone for an iPhone in 2014. It is difficult to understand her relationship with the iPhone. It seems to always be in her hand, except when she is asking me if I know where she left it. She reads a lot of her emails on it and is on Facebook a lot. I'll admit it is handy to be able to get instant information from the Internet wherever you are (especially since all I have is a dumb phone). This Christmas all she asked for were i-things for her iPhone. I got her several, though none were actual Apple items.

While we were on vacation a few months ago, my wife was constantly concerned about her phones charge level. My poor dumb phone can go for days on a single charge, but her iPhone needed to be charged at least every day. One gift I picked out for her was a Patriot Fuel+ 1500 mAh mobile rechargeable battery (www.patriotmemory.com). It works like other portable batteries, but this one has a Lightning connector for easier connection and mobile use (and higher price due to the Apple-licensed connector).

My wife used to charge her Windows phone in the kitchen, but she now charges her iPhone in our bathroom where she can be closer to it at night. This puts her phone in my way in the morning when I'm getting ready for work. Her Christmas list included an iHome Docking clock radio (www.ihomeaudio.com), which solved that problem. It

replaced her bedside clock radio and provides a Lightning connector for charging her iPhone and playing music through the clock's speakers.

We have a radio mounted under one of our kitchen cabinets, but it is kind of old. My wife wanted a new one that could also play music from her iPhone. I got her the iLive Bluetooth Under Cabinet Music System (www.iliveelectronics.com) to replace our old kitchen radio. It mounts under cabinets and can stream from most Bluetooth-capable devices.

The item she was most excited about was a selfie stick. I bought her a Noot Extendable Self-Portrait Handheld Stick Monopod from Amazon. It is an extendable pole with a phone mount. It comes with a Bluetooth remote that can be paired with your phone to actuate the camera shutter.

What Do I Want in 2015?

I'm not much for making New Year's resolutions, though there are a few things I'd like to accomplish or improve on in 2015 related to technology. I tend to buy a lot of tech items and accessories to experiment with. These are mostly inexpensive items like adapters or cables, but sometimes they are more significant. I have a new Windows 7 desktop PC that I bought a while ago but have yet to set up to use. I bought it to replace my XP desktop computer, but for a number of reasons have not found the time to make the trade. I'd like to get my new PC running in 2015 and shut down my last XP desktop computer for good.

With my desktop PC so old, I primarily use my Windows 7 laptop. I'd like to improve the laptop's performance by putting in a larger hard drive and more RAM. I'd like to do the same for my wife's laptop.

I have a box full of VHS video tapes that I'd like to digitize. These are home videos of my kids growing up. I have a device for converting them - I just need to set it up again and do it. I also have boxes of photographic slides that I need to scan to JPEG files. Once again, I've got the scanner and have a process, but just need the time to finish the job.

I would like to get more use out of my iPad in 2015. I won an iPad Mini over a year ago in a drawing but don't use it that much. I use it as a web browsing device but not much more. I actually find it is not that easy to understand and use; this is probably because I have used Windows computers for so long. I even bought myself an "iPad for Dummies"-type book but have not had time to sit down with it.

Hopefully I can get a lot done in 2015. Right now the New Year holds a lot of promise and potential. Of course I once felt that way about 2014.