President's Corner
Looking Back to See Ahead
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Another year goes into the record books, and we get a new, clean slate ahead. As we say good-bye to 2017 and prepare to start writing 2018 on our checks (hey, wait a minute; who writes checks these days, anyway?), we are confronted by this arbitrary boundary in time once again.

It is obvious the year and its length are derived from our Earth's orbit around the sun. But why set the boundary for a year in the winter? Wouldn't all those people in Times Square have a much better New Year's Eve in the spring, summer or even autumn? Our January 1 is not even tied to any astronomical event, like an equinox or solstice.

Ancient civilizations celebrated the new year at different times with respect to the seasons. Mesopotamians had their new year's rockin eve (no doubt with real stones) in the spring, around the vernal equinox. The autumnal equinox was when ancient Egyptians and Persians celebrated their new year. The ancient Greeks began their new year around December 20, the winter solstice.

So why do we believe the New Year starts on January 1st? It seems we can blame it on the Romans. Among the many things we still use that are carried over from the Roman Empire, including aqueducts, roads and a numerical system that we use to count our Super Bowls, is the Julian calendar. That calendar begins with the month of January, named for the Roman god of doorways and beginnings, Janus; his feast begins the new year.

Janus is depicted as having two faces, one looking back in time and one looking forward into the future. Around this time of year there are often predictions made for the new year. I've written columns in the past for this month, trying to prognosticate on what is to come in the tech world, mostly with little success. Bill Gates was probably right when he said, "We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten." I keep thinking something monumental will happen in tech in the next few years, but it rarely does, yet in 2007 few people could have seen imagined the impact the iPhone, Facebook, Twitter, Airbnb, IBM's Watson and fracking would have on our lives today. Perhaps by viewing the world like Janus, and first looking back on the past year, can be a better picture of what is to come in 2018.

We all look at the world through unique eyes, with our perceptions filtered by our own personalities and experiences. I'm heavily involved in technology on a daily basis, being an electrical engineer presently designing digital communications equipment. I read quite a bit about the latest innovations, yet I would not consider myself an "early

adopter." Part of this may be due to my age; I'm part of the tail end of the baby boomer demographic. I may have a lot more money for technology, but I don't necessarily buy into it (or some of the societal change that often go with it) as much as my millennial children. I also look more at anything I'm buying as a value proposition. Cutting-edge technology may be really nice, but it usually costs a lot more when it is the latest and greatest. I prefer to wait a bit until the costs are lower, the capabilities are more proven, and the pitfalls are uncovered. I also prefer the devices that emphasize capability over cachet; I don't need a fruit on my device solely for the sake of status.

For me, 2017 was a year of increased connectivity. I bought my first smartphone in June, after moving into the world of SMS text communication with a flip phone only the year before. I've accelerated my longtime interest in home automation, adding many more Smart Home tech items. I've taken advantage of faster internet connections to stream more content, and have found a greater need to use and improve my home Wi-Fi setup. I find I'm more often using more Android and Chrome OS devices, and fewer Windows devices for my connections.

Getting a smartphone is no doubt the biggest tech change in my life in the last year, and it has been an enabler for additional tech. I was the last in my family of four to get one, in spite of being the one that paid for them all (or, perhaps because I was the one paying for them all). When I was finally able to be happy with the value I was getting, my new Samsung Galaxy J3 Prime Android phone (a new but lower cost model) joined the iPhones and Google Nexus phone on the family phone plan in June. It is great to be able to get information from the internet (practically) wherever you are. I text a lot more than call, while purposely not using the phone much for email. I find I'm using my Magellan vehicle GPS a lot less now, and the Google maps app a lot more when driving. My phone's camera is pretty good but not fantastic; while most of the pictures on this year's family photo Christmas card were taken by phones (selfies), I'm not giving up on digital cameras. When my good digital camera broke this year, I found out how poor a substitute the phone was for all but basic photography, and so got a replacement camera. My 2017 eclipse photos with the digital camera were great, while the phone photos of the event were a bust.

Yet my adoption of the smartphone into my life is a cautious and measured change. Karl Marx may have felt that religion was the opiate of the masses, but he never got to see how people's behavior has changed as a result of constant connectedness and social media. I believe smartphones and Facebook are the new opiates of the masses, and I don't want to be among the addicted. Last night at Phil's BBQ, my wife again commented to me on how many people (and not just children) were paying more attention to their screens than their families at dinner. Driver's laps are not supposed to glow; far too many concentrate on their devices, rather than the road. I'll use my phone for navigation when driving, but will always pull over to read a text or answer a call.

I've fortunately never become obsessed with social media. While I can see how, when used in moderation, Facebook can be useful to keep in touch with family and friends, its overuse can be a problem. I don't have a Facebook account, but I've seen the

excessive postings of others on my wife's account. They remind me of a favorite engineering "law." *The more time you spend reporting on what you are doing, the less time you have to do anything. Stability is achieved when you are spending all your time reporting on the nothing you are doing.* Just substitute posting for reporting, and you'll see where I'm going.

My wife does more watching on Facebook than posting, but still posts more that I think is necessary, especially when we are away on vacation. It is frustrating to return to work after a weekend trip with your wife, and not be able to tell anyone about your adventures, as your coworkers have already been told by their wives about the posts your wife made on Facebook while you were away (including photos).

We have also increased our Smart Home connectedness this year. We bought an Amazon Echo Dot voice-operated assistant device for our home in late 2016, and bought a second this spring for upstairs. We now have a few light controllers and a smart thermostat that are Alexa-compatible. I even bought a Google Home Mini during the Black Friday sale, so we could see what the competing device offers. The three networked, Wi-Fi security cameras I bought this year allowed us to watch over our home while away on vacation, and I've purchased a couple for outdoor security use as well. My new smartphone of course allows me to view the cameras, control the lights and adjust the heating while away (or just in the recliner).

One problem with all this connectedness is maintaining all the connections. I have always been suspicious of Wi-Fi as a secure means of networking, preferring wired Ethernet. With all these new IoT Wi-Fi devices, our poor little Wi-Fi access point has become inadequate. To get the range required to put these new cameras and other devices anywhere in the house I want, I've had to look at changing to a mesh Wi-Fi network. It seems that all this tech feeds on itself, creating more issues that require new technology for the solutions.

So, considering where I've been this last year, can I get any insight into where at least I'll be going with technology in the coming year? Probably more of the same, but at an increased level. I doubt self-driving cars will be available this year, but I won't be buying one if they are. They will be new and have insufficient value for their cost. Maybe in 5-10 years, though.

Will I buy a new iPhone? Not when I could have had six of the Samsung phones I bought for the cost of the replacement iPhone I bought for my wife this fall. Will I get rid of my Magellan car GPS? Maybe. Although it was useful on our eclipse trip to Nebraska (when Google Maps could not navigate due to the lack of a good cell connection in rural areas), it could probably be replaced by an app on my phone. Will I get rid of my digital camera? No, the phone camera is not good enough yet. Will I take more phone photos? Yes, it is way too convenient, and with me most of the time. Will I get Facebook or Twitter accounts? No, still not interested. Will I book an Uber or Lyft ride in 2018? Maybe, since I now have a smartphone. I've been part of a few group rides booked by others, and it seems convenient.

Since Windows 7 extended support ends in January 2019, I'll probably start worrying about what to do about our four Win7 computers later on this year. Perhaps Microsoft will extend security support. Perhaps I'll just take them off my network, like I've done with my XP machine. Perhaps I won't care, as I'm using Windows for fewer computer activities anyway. I'll be buying TurboTax to file my 2017 taxes, but my 2018 tax filing may be a lot simpler, though costlier.