@ JIM CARROLL

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The rumours of high tech's death are greatly exaggerated



BY JIM CARROLL

There's still plenty of technology to come, and the future is still going to happen. It's just going to take longer than people thought

For the first time in 20 years, I don't have a modem connected to my main desktop computer, a fact that I think bodes well for the future of the Internet.

But before I explain why, let's examine the current state of technology companies. They're hurting to such a degree that many can't even seem to afford to advertise anymore. The end of the great dot-com pig-out, and the ensuring tech-market meltdown, has meant that many publications that focused on the tech world and its future have recently disappeared in a blaze of publicity. Think *The Industry Standard*, which announced its closure in August, and its formerly inch-thick weekly issues.

It isn't just in-the-biz magazines that are hurting. All kinds of other publications that included a good smattering of technology coverage have scaled back in dramatic fashion. (My own *Globe and Mail* column, which ran for three years and which had a solid base of loyal readers, was cut some months back with but three days' notice. Why? Well, simply open the massively shrunk *Report on Business* and the reason is evident–it's called "shrinkage.")

The sad thing about the tech-advertising pullback and resulting tech-publication implosion is that now there's little general reporting on what's happening in the world of technology, other than often-hysterical stock market reports. Indeed, if you read anything today, it would seem that the era of technology innovation is over.

All of which is why I hold up my new modemless life as a good barometer of the fact that everything is only going to get better–and soon. Why? Because if you get beyond the media, and immerse yourself in tech, you realize that there's still plenty going on, and all kinds of wonderful stuff yet to come.

So how does my modem fit into all this? Here's my story: My life passed through a bit of a watershed a few weeks ago when I decided to reinstall Windows (I do this every few months to clean out the junk that often slows my machine to a crawl). In doing so this time, I realized I no longer need my USRobotics modem. I stuck it in a drawer, perhaps never to be seen again, because while it might suggest that it was a V.Everything model, it had truly become nothing more than V.Useless.

Now, I've long had modems in my life. Indeed, I first got online way back in 1982, using a "blindingly fast" 300 baud modem. Of course, since then, my modem life has migrated steadily upwards; I've had relationships with devices that featured "baud rates" of 1,200, 2,400, 9,600, 14,400, 28,800 and 33,400 baud, until I finally topped out in 1996 at a sophisticated 56,000 baud device. The one I just retired.

Of course, I've long had a high-speed cable modem connection to my home. Gradually, my use of my regular modem became infrequent, with only the occasional WinFax being sent or received. And yet, as more people began using e-mail, even WinFax served no purpose. I realized, finally, that I last used my modem about six months ago, and so I've ripped it out.

And therein lies the meat of the matter: high-speed technologies are leading us to a different type of Internet. Take the world of Internet broadcast. It's certainly been much talked about as something for the future, yet there've been several high-profile flame-outs of those who have tried to build online broadcast businesses. The result is that many people now believe that there's no future in Internet broadcasting, which is, of course, total rubbish.

In my modemless life, I'm regularly listening to a huge variety of Internet-only radio stations through my AudioTron, a device that I've written about in this column in the past. These stations come through my high-speed Internet connection into my home network, and straight into this device, which is, in essence, a stereo component. From there, the sound is then blasted out directly through my home stereo amplifier. The range of available stations is impressive, as I can choose from literally thousands of specialized Internet broadcasters. And there's no doubt that it works. I just spent an entire day working in the yard and hanging out by the pool, all the while listening to an '80s-only radio station in the background. The quality was extremely impressive, to such a degree that you wouldn't even know the station was coming through the Internet unless I told you.

Of course, a device like the Turtle Beach AudioTron is only one of the countless innovations that continue to occur in the world of technology. For example, many marketers certainly know that something "big" is going on with PVR (personal video recorders) technology, which lets people record TV programs directly to a computer-like device and, thus, using the wonders of the hard drive, easily skip through commercials.

But these revolutionary changes aren't just happening in the television mainstream, with initiatives such as Bell ExpressVu's new PVR system. In my case, I'm spending time playing around with SnapStream, a cool piece of software that lets me turn any computer into a PVR for a relatively low cost. Right now, it pulls signals into my computer using a standard cable-TV connection. But imagine things five years from now. At some point, my cable modem or high-speed ADSL connection will become as outdated as a regular modem is today, for the simple reason that I'll have a fibre-optic connection to my home. When that happens, I'll be able to pull signals from a multitude of Internet-only video broadcasters from around the world.

The point is this: There's still plenty of technology to come, and the future is still going to happen. It's just going to take longer than people thought it would back in the high-tech heyday. And that's an important thing to realize as we continue these dark and tech-weary times.

JIM CARROLL is the Mississauga, Ont.-based author of more than 29 books related to the Internet and e-commerce.