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Northeast Wisconsin Personal Computer Users Group Newsletter

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Volume 21, Issue 7

AUGUST MEETING

Thursday, August 17, 2017

7 pm

Fox Valley Technical College

Bordini Center

Presentation on

Home Security

By

Bob Schroeder

RAMblings

By Sharon Wichman, NEW PCUG President



Hi all, I hope everyone is having a fantastic summer. I love the 80° weather, its great swimming weather, but the 70's are ok too.

So I hope everyone had a great month off last month, but now back to our meetings. This month Bob Schroeder will be doing the presentation on Home Security. We also need to think of other things to do as a presentation. We're running out of things to discuss, so any suggestions would be helpful. If we run out of things to discuss I'm not sure what's gonna happen to the group. So if you want to keep going we need some suggestions.

I hope to see you all at the meeting this coming Thursday.



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Articles in this newsletter are provided as a service of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups, of which our group is a member



The Personal Computer Golden Age

By Dick Maybach, Member, Brookdale Computer Users' Group, NJ
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Some of us fondly recall the early days of personal computers in the '70s and '80s. We could poke through PC parts in dusty stores, frequently adjacent to ham radio equipment and war surplus electronics, or wait in long lines, in heat or snow depending on the season, for admission to a hall full of vendors whose only addresses were the license plates on their trailers.

We would carry our treasures home, install them in our PC, and spend hours getting them to work (or maybe not). We would swap diskette shareware (software that was available for free, but included a request for payment). We had to learn a fair amount just to get our PCs operating, and a good bit more to configure them to work efficiently. There were many computer magazines, and bookstores had shelves full of computer material. However, by today's standards our computers and the applications they ran were limited and crude. The Internet was still in the future, and if we exchanged e-mail it was by using a bulletin board system that we accessed over telephone lines.

There were text games, such as Hunt the Wumpus, and those with very crude graphics, such as NetHack. Editors were text only, with few provisions for formatting. Displays were universally cathode ray tubes (even for computers that claimed to be portable) and showed only text. Diskettes provided our only storage.

Today, the computer stores, shows, magazines, and books have largely disappeared. We buy our computer from an electronics store or an Internet dealer, turn it on, and expect it to work out of the box. As a result, many of us know little more about the internal workings of our PCs than we do about our cars, and computer enthusiasts lament the passing of the golden age. However, this grief is mistaken, for although much has changed, the golden age of personal computers is today richer than ever. Let's look at a few examples.

Creative Writing – In high school and college, I used a manual typewriter and a special, rather greasy-feeling, paper that could be erased. A 1000-word paper was a term project, and each revision required retyping the whole thing. Research involved a trip to the library, and any graphics were done by hand on separate sheets. Now such a task is an afternoon of labor, and most of the time is spent on the content rather than the tedium of putting the characters and graphics on the page.

When I first went to work, engineers wrote on lined pads or coding sheets and sent them to a typing pool or a keypunch room. Some days later, we'd get the result, mark the corrections, and send it back. Major changes required literal cut-and-paste (with scissors and tape). Again, after a few days, we saw the results, often with a new set of typos. This would continue until exhaustion convinced us the result was "good enough." As a result, the average engineer produced about one finished page per day. Word-processing or coding software now corrects mistakes as we go, typing pools and keypunch operators have disappeared, and engineers spend more of their time developing products.

Publishing – Years ago, to create a published work, you typed the text (making liberal use of white-out), and glued it to card stock along with the photos and graphics. You then took these to a printer who photographed the pages and assembled a book or booklet. When I look at my high-school year book, I can clearly see the cellophane tape used to hold down the photos. Today, publishing software with its spelling and grammar checking and sophisticated layout capabilities allows individuals to produce work of much higher quality, and we can send the resulting e-book to as many people as we like. Or we can abandon the book metaphor and publish our thoughts on Facebook or a Website, where many examples make my old yearbook look shabby indeed.

Calculation – When I was in college, my calculator was a slide rule, which had an accuracy of two to three significant digits and could only multiply and evaluate simple functions (typically trigonometric). Moreover, it didn't keep track of decimal points, which I had to do manually. Adding required paper and pencil. Plotting the results meant using a drafting board and its associated tools. Now, we have scientific software that not only evaluates formulas, but also performs algebra and calculus and plots the results. Indeed, electronic circuit simulators are available so we don't even have to assemble circuits to measure their responses.

Research – Years ago, the telephone-book yellow pages were about our only source of information about vendors, and product information was delivered by mail. Compared to what is now available on the Internet, these yielded very slim pickings indeed. Instead of having to trek down to a public library (assuming it were open), we can search the Internet from home at any time, where such institutions as the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/>, and the Vatican, <http://digi.vatlib.it/>, make many of their documents available. True, much of the Internet content is trash, but with relatively little effort, its many treasures can be unearthed.

Entertainment – We are no longer limited to listening to only the local radio stations or reading the local newspapers. Most media sources around the world allow at least limited browsing of their material and maintain archives of their past publications. The problem is not access, but finding the gems hidden in the tons of overburden.

Photography – When I was young, editing photographs required a darkroom, an enlarger, and a chemical kit, costing several thousand of today's dollars, especially if you were using color. The effects, even when implemented by skilled technicians, were crude compared to what we can do today. Video editing was even cruder, as it was limited to cutting film strips and gluing them back together, and the only sound was the projectionist's narration. Today, using software ranging in cost from inexpensive to free, people with far less expertise can achieve truly spectacular effects.

Computer Technology – Today, we can buy very inexpensive, single-board computers, such as the Arduino and Raspberry Pi, and experiment safely with them, since they are separate from our PCs. (They offer the additional advantage of being quite small and cheap, which means that if all else fails we can at least indulge our frustration by throwing them to the floor and stomping on them.) We do our shopping on the Internet and buy from vendors who offer far more variety than was available in any store or show. Both commercial and open-source software is widely available on the Internet, and it's far more sophisticated. Of course, we have to be careful to protect ourselves from malware, but that isn't new.

It's easy to get into a routine with PCs and use them for the same chores every day, instead of exploring new territory like you did when you first discovered them. Take a fresh look at the activities that pique your interest, and you will probably find computer tools to make them more rewarding. Being knowledgeable about computers' abilities and limitation, you have a head start on your search. Exploring such new capabilities requires initiative, because you must install, and of course learn to use effectively, additional software and perhaps hardware.

As usual, there are trade-offs between effort and cost, in particular between heavily-advertised commercial programs, which often emphasize ease of use, and open source ones, which often have more features but require more expertise. I prefer the latter, because I can install several, experiment with them, choose those that suit me, and discard the others. I'm less likely to do this if each test requires a new purchase. Regardless of your approach, using a personal computer can inexpensively broaden your interests and improve your skills.

Easy Spreadsheets for Home Finances

By Jim Cerny, Forum Leader, Sarasota Technology User's Group, FL
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Tax time has come and gone and this is always a good time to review your financial status. Over the years I have found that two easy spreadsheets have helped me a great deal in keeping track of my finances and I would like to share them with you. It is important that you know that it is NOT difficult to keep a spreadsheet, especially if you are only doing basic calculations. My first spreadsheet tracks all my expenses, month by month, and the other spreadsheet tracks my investments, also monthly. (See the two samples with this article – I am showing only three months instead of twelve, but you will get the idea).

By using these two spreadsheets I can easily see what bills I have paid (or not), the past amounts paid for each, and I can see those quarterly or annual payments as well. For my investments status, I can see the amount and percent gain/loss each month and the overall gain/loss for the year. Color shading of the rows of cells in each spreadsheet is very helpful, easy to do, and makes the data easy to view. All “formulas” that I use are only totals, differences from the previous month column, and percentages. Really easy stuff for a spreadsheet!

The only spreadsheet “skills” that you need to know for all of this are listed here, and you can find instructions by looking them up on Google:

Merge cells to create titles on your spreadsheet that span multiple columns. This makes the spreadsheet look nice.

Enter a number (dollar amount) in a cell.

Enter text into a cell.

Color a background to a cell, row, or column.

Enter a summation formula in the bottom cell to add all the cells in that column above.

The formula: SUM(b2:b15) will add all the values in the cells in column B from B2 through B15.

This formula should be entered in the last cell in the column which would be B16 in this example.

Just change the numbers to add the cells you want.

Add and/or delete a row or column of cells.

And that's about it. Of course, there is always more to learn if you want, but just these skills will work just fine for the basics.

Let's begin with my “Monthly Expenses” spreadsheet and how you can modify it to suit your situation. I have each billing company or organization in the first column “a,” followed by a column for each month across the sheet “b” through “m,” twelve months. The last column on the right “n” is a total column.

Basically, I have grouped my bills that come due each and every month at the top of the sheet, followed by those bills I consistently pay by credit card (a different color). These are then followed by those odd bills, the ones I pay quarterly or annually, and one-time bills such as for home improvements, etc. Don't forget to keep your medical bills clearly indicated in another color too. Usually it is a good idea to use your charge card for many bills because you can separate out the medical, food, and other charges as you need to for tax purposes. I usually do not track my cash payments out of my pocket (lunches, misc. expenses, etc.) but I DO track how much I take out from the bank in cash for those expenses. By looking across each row I can see how that bill went up or down and how much I have been using in gas or electric, etc. If my water bill jumps up, for example, maybe I have a leak or maybe I just filled up my pool too much. At the end of the year I can see how much I paid, total and monthly average, for all my expenses.

For my “Financial Status” or “Investments” spreadsheet I do pretty much the same thing, one row across for each investment or account, and a column for each month. I enter the numbers into the spreadsheet based upon my monthly account statements. On my example, I have one row that is all negative as it is a loan or debt. The rows at the bottom contain the totals and the percent difference (up or down) from the previous month. Whenever you enter a new number in a cell, the totals, averages, and percentages are all automatically calculated for you. The column at the far right tells me the percentage gain/loss for the year so **far for each investment**.

Remember you can just add more rows as you need. It fits nicely on my computer screen and, if I print it out in “landscape” mode, it looks great. Learning how to use the basics of a spreadsheet is a great way to find out if spreadsheets can help you in other areas as well. There is free spreadsheet software on Google Drive and Open Office, and free help on using them on Google and YouTube. Why not give it a try? – it's a lot easier than keeping written records by hand!

The Perils of Printing

By Greg Skalka, President, Under the Hood Computer User Group, CA
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Does anyone really need a printer anymore? When was the last time you printed something from the device you are reading this on?

If you are reading this on a desktop PC, odds are good you have printed something recently. If reading this on a laptop, you have maybe a 50/50 chance of ever having printed from this device. If you are reading this from your Chromebook or tablet, it is highly unlikely you have ever printed. And if you are viewing this on your smart phone, you not only have good eyesight, but you have no use for printing (and no practical way to do it).

Printers were once an essential part of a computer system. The first computers needed a printer to provide any kind of an output, since at that point email and the Internet did not exist. Letters and other written communications had to be printed. Before computers, the only way to make multiple copies of your correspondence was to use carbon paper between paper sheets in your typewriter. With a computer and printer, the same document could be printed as many times as desired. Need to make a change to your document? Instead of using liquid paper or correction tape for minor changes, or completely retyping for major ones, the computer user could easily make changes to their saved document and reprint.

Early printers copied their typewriter predecessors in technique. I once owned a daisy wheel printer, which used the same impact method as a typewriter, but held the printing type on a flat wheel resembling a daisy flower. To print graphics, I also had to have a dot-matrix printer, which, though faster, produced output of poorer quality. Both were black only; it was rare to have a color dot-matrix printer, as it required a special (and expensive) ribbon with bands of different ink colors.

Being impact printers, both kinds made a lot of noise and shook the table they sat on. The daisy wheel printer used standard sheet paper, while the dot-matrix printer required special paper with holes on the edges to allow the paper to feed. This paper usually had the feed holes on side strips that were perforated for removal, and was sold in boxes of z-folded sheets separated by perforations (one continuous strip of sheets per box). That kind of paper made great printer banners. Dot-matrix impact printers dominated the printing world through the 1980's but were displaced by laser and ink-jet printers, due to their lower cost, higher quality and faster output.

I would have thought that dot-matrix printers had gone the way of the Dodo bird, but to my surprise, Office Depot shows 58 dot-matrix impact printers currently available on their web site. They also have the continuous feed paper needed to make those banners. Fry's Electronics at this point only carries ink jet and laser printers.

Laser printers had the highest quality output but were expensive (both in initial cost and in supplies). Ink jet printers were and still are the most popular printer, with good quality and lower cost. They were even more economical if you refilled your own ink cartridges, as the printer makers used the "sell the printer cheap and make it back on the ink" sales model. I once bought ink refill kits and refilled ink cartridges myself, which can be messy, but now I don't print so much and am lazy. At this point I don't bother trying to save the few dollars a year refilling would give me.

Initial ink jet and laser printers were mostly black-only, with color being very expensive. Now all ink jet printers and almost half the laser models available are color. I still have a "photo-quality" ink jet printer that I once used to print photos; it now gathers dust. Today the print quality of even average ink jet printers is good enough for photos, and I print so few now that I usually just get them printed at the Costco photo center.

Hewlett Packard has most of the printer market today, with Canon in second place. Though Apple still makes Macs, they no longer make printers. I guess the majority of their products today can't print, anyway.

Though I still have a few separate printers, like a lot of people, I now use an all-in-one printer, copier and scanner (it also can fax, but who does that anymore?). When my kids were in school and had computers of their own, every computer in the house had its own dedicated printer. These originally connected to the computers via parallel port, and then later through USB. Now my one HP network all-in-one printer does 99% of the household printing for all computers, and I plug one of my USB printers into a computer only occasionally.

My two children used printers (that I provided) when they lived with me. Now that they are both grown and live on their own, neither one owns a printer. They are the typically millennials; having cut the cord; they don't have cable or satellite TV, but instead watch over-the-air broadcasts or from the Internet. With only mobile computing devices, they have cut the printer cord as well. My son prints the few personal things he needs at work, while my daughter finds no need for printing. Since tickets and coupons can now be presented on a smart phone screen for redemption, they have little need for actual paper items.

I'm still hanging on to a number of printers, though I have two I've not used in years and should get rid of at this point. I do continue to print quite a bit, probably several pages a week at least. Since I don't have my own smart phone, I must still print out coupons, Groupons and tickets on paper, at least for when my wife is not with me. I have automobile service manuals in PDF form, and rather than view them in the garage with greasy hands on my tablet or Chromebook, I'd prefer to print the pages I need to reference for service work I do. I update and monitor my personal Outlook calendar on my PDA, but prefer to always have monthly paper copies to refer to.

Windows was made for printing, but other operating systems seem to have left off that feature. Android, iOS, Linux and Chrome OS don't really support printing, and most printers don't have drivers to support them. I have a lot of devices that can view or access the Internet, but only my Windows machines can print the Internet. I like my Chromebook and use it daily, but I can't print from it, and so must carry items over on a Flash drive to my laptop for printing.

I use my Android tablet and iPad Mini less often; they can't print either, so are not quite as useful to me as they could be. My Amazon Dot can answer my questions, control my lights and play music for me, but can't provide a physical output (unless you count orders shipped from Amazon).

It seems the older you are, the more likely you are to want your own printer. While my children don't own printers, and my wife and I have used the same network printer for about five years, my parents have each bought new printers for themselves in the last year. I did buy myself a new printer recently, but have yet to set it up. I bought the HP OfficeJet Pro 7740 mainly for its ability to scan both sides of a page through its feeder.

I am trying to eliminate paper in my life as much as possible, and so get all my bills and financial statements as PDFs. I still have a few file cabinets of older records and so have been scanning them and then shredding my older paper financial documents; the improved scanning capability of the 7740 would speed up that process. It also can print on 11" x 17" paper, something I can do at work and have wanted at home for some time.

While printing is still useful to me, I do see the amount I print diminishing. As with my stock of blank CDs and DVDs, the stockpile of special printer papers and greeting card stock I've purchased over the years is likely now a lifetime supply. Emails and e-greeting cards have almost eliminated printed correspondence (sorry about that, U.S. Postal Service). When I first bought my all-in-one printer, I printed much more than I scanned. Now it is the other way around.

How to Stream TV

By Sandy Berger, CompuKiss
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There is no doubt that the world of television content and the way we get that content is changing. Many people are "cutting the cord" by turning their backs on cable and satellite TV. These folks are turning to streaming TV shows and movies. For those of you who are not yet familiar with "streaming", here's a quick tutorial on how to stream and what you need.

Streaming is named for a technique for transmitting data over the Internet so that it can be processed as a steady and continuous stream. This differs from downloading content in which the entire chunk of data must be downloaded before it can be processed. Most users do not have enough bandwidth to download an entire movie or TV show, so streaming is a great technique. During streaming the content is constantly being processed so you can watch the show while it is being processed with no interruption.

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Streaming TV

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Streaming allows you to watch television shows and movies without having a cable or satellite subscription. You can use streaming to augment a basic cable or satellite TV subscription or to eliminate cable or satellite subscriptions completely making it a valuable tool for TV watching.

Also, Netflix and Amazon are now producing their own programming, much of which, like House of Cards, has become very popular. With streaming you can also watch a wide variety of movies and the past episodes of many different TV shows.

Even if you are not technically inclined, you will find that streaming is quite simple to setup. Here's what you need.

First -- a HDTV with a HDMI port. While older analog TVs can also be set up to stream, having an HDMI port make it much easier. All HDTVs, which include most newer TVs have these ports. To find them look at the back of the TV, they are usually labeled HDMI.

Second -- You need a good broadband Internet connection. This is how the data (movies) will get to your television. The faster the better and you might want to upgrade your Internet, but you may not have to. Try it with the connection you have right now. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Third -- you need a streaming media device. Some newer TVs and most Blu-ray players can access the Internet. If you have one of these you can use it as your media streaming device.

If you don't have one of these, you will need to purchase a new device. The good news is that these devices are small and inexpensive. These devices include Chromecast, Roku, and Amazon Fire TV and Fire Stick. They range in price from \$30 to \$100. I have tried them all and they all work quite well. If you already belong to Amazon Prime, an Amazon Fire might be the best choice. To get the best selection of content, Roku is the best. In any case, the main difference in price is often whether the device comes with a remote control or not. If it doesn't come with a remote, like the Chromecast, you will have to use a tablet or mobile phone to control it. If that doesn't appeal to you, opt for one with a remote.

Fourth -- you will need a wireless router. Although some devices can hook up directly to your wired Internet router, in most cases your television is not in the same room as the Internet connection making it necessary to have a wireless router to transmit the data wirelessly to your television. If you already have wireless in your home for a tablet or phone, you are all set.

When you get your streaming media device home, you simply plug it into the TV. Set the TV to the proper input like HDMI 1 or HDMI 2, then follow the set up instructions that will appear on the screen. All are easy to follow. The only thing you will need is to know the password for your wireless network if it is password protected.

After the setup you will see your choices of things to watch. Some of these will be free, some will have extra costs. For instance Netflix and Hulu both have a ton of content, but each charges about \$10 a month. Fortunately both have free trials which you can use.

Watching streaming media on your TV is not as simple as watching cable TV. There are little inconveniences. Every time you want to switch to your streaming device, you have to change the input on your television. Also there is no simple guide as the one you get with cable or satellite TV. You often have to search for what you want to watch. The Amazon Fire TV (not the Fire Stick) makes this easier because its remote has a voice search which works quite well. Just speak the name of a movie, actor, or director and it will find the movie you want. This, however, only works for Amazon Prime movies and shows. Also, if you have more than one subscription, you have to remember which movies are on which service....Now was Orange is the New Black on Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon?

Yet, the inconveniences are minor and there are advantages. For instance, after I started streaming I was able to watch the entire series of Downton Abbey on Amazon and House of Cards on Netflix at my convenience. How wonderful to watch a few episodes a week until I got caught up!

If you haven't yet tried streaming, be sure to check it out. You may find a new way of watching television that can save you money and give you new options.



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Membership, Dues And Renewals

All personal computer users in the Valley are invited to join the Northeast Wisconsin Personal Users Group. Membership entitles you to the monthly newsletter, special discounts, and more.

Annual dues are \$15 for single person memberships and \$20 for family memberships. You may pay your dues at the meeting or by mail to Nan MacDonald, 2440 Parkside Drive, Oshkosh, WI 54901. Her email address is macduks@att.net.

Members are reminded to renew their annual memberships as above.

Date of renewal is November of each year.

