

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 153. A New Phenomenon, and Some Advice

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I think I am seeing the beginning of a new phenomenon in the computer world. Let me set the stage for my explanation.

In the really old days, only a few people messed with computers. I am talking about the time when the prevalent operating systems were CP/M and really early versions of DOS (terms that many of you may not even recognize). The folks who used computers back then were pushing into new territory, experimenting with what the machines and the software could do. Most of these folks were pioneers that wanted to know how the machines worked as well as discerning how they could be used.

Then, a groundswell of users began, especially when it was discovered by Business that the machines could be useful. Corporations began to use them in computation, word processing and even in projections of business trends that were largely not available before machines could crunch huge numbers of numbers. Still, many computer users learned how computers worked, and learned the slow (and sometimes painful) way to deal with the clumsy software that writers were producing. People were curious, and often asked software manufacturers “why don’t you do it this way – it is sooo much more logical and easier to understand”. And, sometimes the software writers listened, and improved what they were producing. The point is, there was a public curiosity about how computers did what they did, and a great many folks were willing to invest time in learning the basics and even in giving feedback to the hardware and software manufacturers to make things better. There were many users that were perfectly willing to experiment with their machines to “see what would happen if ...”, though some were timid and thought they might break the machine by doing something wrong at the keyboard or mouse.

Nowadays, nearly everyone has a computer or has access to one. And today’s crop of computer users are beginning to look at the machines somewhat differently than those mentioned above. Users are viewing computers as appliances, to get on the Internet or to do one’s taxes or to write a letter. People no longer want to interact with the computer, especially not to see how they work. They want to use it, much like a refrigerator or television set or automobile or other complex tool. Folks simply want to know what it takes to use it.

Hey, we are seeing the same sort of transition in the world of ham radio. We call many, if not the majority of hams today “appliance operators” (those who simply buy their station components and connect them together). By contrast, a majority of hams of the previous generation “rolled their own” (made part or even all of the components that went into their stations).

So today we are seeing mainly “computer appliance operators”, just as in ham radio. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. It is just a natural progression, apparently to be expected. Not many folks today know how a cell phone works, or for that matter, an automobile. And maybe that is not even necessary. But, we should be aware of this phenomenon, because it is our present and future history.

OK, that is enough philosophy. Let me finish up by re-emphasizing a couple of free software packages that every Windows XP, Vista or 7 computer user must have. No matter what you do with your machine, if you do not have these and use them regularly, your machine is not working properly or is at risk. How is that for a dogmatic statement? Dogmatic it may be, but it is absolutely true.

1. Virus protection (antivirus software). Microsoft Security Essentials. It works, is not in your face, and it is free. You need not send your hard earned cash to McAfee or Norton, or anyone else. Like having an exterminator spray the periphery of your house in a termite-prone area of the country. Skip this and you are asking for trouble.
2. CCleaner. By 25 Aug 2010, half a billion copies of this free cleaner had been downloaded. Does that tell you something? Learn to use it (pretty simple). Cleans up the general junk, and fixes bad Registry entries (two separate steps). Like cleaning your garage, then your basement.
3. Defraggler. Use it in place of the defragmenter that comes with Windows. Why? It is faster, more flexible and just as safe to use. You can defragment a single file, or the whole disk, or have it go to work starting at 3:00 a.m. Unlike Windows, it shows you what files are fragmented. Freeware by the same folks who make CCleaner (Piriform). Like putting things on labeled shelves in your basement, so you can find stuff quickly.
4. Glary Utilities. Like CCleaner, but somewhat more thorough; also free. I use CCleaner daily or every other day, and Glary Utilities once a week. Like hosing out your garage – needs doing every now and then but not daily.

Not mentioned is a firewall, because the one that comes with Windows is quite adequate. A firewall is like locking your doors when you go to work. Forget to do it and you are asking for trouble.

Google the names above, or visit majorgeeks.com – the best place in the world to get free software.

Happy Computing!