

---

12-2007

## Cultural Commentary: When Lust meets Lag

William C. Levin  
*Bridgewater State College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev)



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Levin, William C. (2007). Cultural Commentary: When Lust meets Lag. *Bridgewater Review*, 26(2), 29-30.  
Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol26/iss2/13](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol26/iss2/13)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

# Cultural Commentary

## When Lust meets Lag

William C. Levin

We are cleaning out a closet at home. It's the one with all the old stuff that still worked when replaced by newer, whizzier technology. Since these things were working fine when retired, we could not justify throwing them out, at least not until today. Let's see, now.

Three electronic calendar and Palm Pilot thingy's. No, four if you count the one that just held phone numbers and addresses. That one cost almost one hundred dollars because it was new technology not so long ago. Today, for less than ten dollars, you can get one that has fifty times as much storage. There are also two docking stations for charging these things and for getting them to talk to the computer.

Eight cameras, all told, six of which use film. Phone calls to camera shops and a quick look on the internet reveal that these are not worth the drive to consign them, nor the postage to sell them on E-bay. Great cameras, really. There is a Kodak Retina II C that was my first serious camera, and I loved it. It had match-needle metering that allowed you to (manually) line up two needles (light into the camera, and camera settings to allow light in) for correct exposure. Unfortunately, you had to estimate distance to the subject because there was no focus through the lens. Ah, the Rolex 35S pock-



et model with the nice German Lens that collapsed into the body for storage. I think I'll just slip that one into my pocket. Some things shouldn't see a landfill even if they will never be used again. There are even two digital cameras. They work, but one has been replaced by a much slimmer pocket model, and another eats up batteries at a shocking rate. The Cannon folks say it would cost more to fix it than it would to buy a new one that is much, much better. We did just that.

Three computers, all in working condition, go next. The monitors might be a problem to dispose

of. I understand they have mercury in them. The story of their obsolescence seems even more dramatic than that of the cameras. Consider the oldest of my computers. It's a KayPro, "portable" computer I bought in 1983. I put the word portable in quotes so you won't confuse it with a current laptop. The KayPro weighed thirty five pounds and had a five inch screen. It had no, repeat no, permanent memory of its own. You had to put a disk in one drive to supply it with 64 K of temporary memory, on which was placed the operating system for the computer. Then you took out the operating system disk which held the software, like a word processing program. A second drive got another disk to which you directed data, such as word documents. By the way, if you don't really know what 64 K of memory is, let's just say that your current coffee maker has more. KayPro

cost 3,000 dollars back then. If you go by the cost of a gallon of gas today, compared with the cost in 1983, I'm estimating that KayPro would cost, oh, 750,000 dollars today. (Actually, it would cost 6,481 dollars today, but I loved that machine so much that I got out of control there. Sorry.) Also, there is an IBM Selectric in the back of the closet. Taped to the typewriter is a box with three "typeballs" for displaying different fonts. And I won't even go into the cell phones. It's too embarrassing.

I could go on, but you get the point. Unless you haven't bought a new item since your black and white console television from the 1950s, black rotary telephone and "HiFi" system with tuner, amplifier and reel-to-reel tape deck (are the tubes still working?), you have thrown out technology after you replaced it with newer stuff. And the rate at which new technologies are being introduced has been accelerating wildly since the middle of the twentieth century.

There are some obvious benefits of this wave of invention. For example, we travel and communicate at much faster rates across greatly expanded areas, and with much less frequent breakdowns of systems. We have nearly instant access to a seemingly infinite supply of high (and low) quality information. We also have access to a greatly expanded range and amount of entertainment, which can be seen and heard with infinitely more clarity and intensity. And, perhaps most importantly, the invention, manufacture and sales of new technologies are a critical part of our economy. But there are also some costs that are worth noting.

First among these, I think, is the obvious waste. If our closet is in any way typical, then you can see that the money we spend on new technologies is enormous. I can defend some of these purchases, especially those that have made jaw-dropping improvements in how I work, enjoy life and think about the world. For example, my move from typewriter to computer was not just an improvement, it changed my working life. In 1973 I typed my dissertation on a manual typewriter and kept the original copy in the freezer against the potential disaster that might have befallen it, and me, had it been damaged. In 1983 my first book written on KayPro was stored on computer disks. Not only was it infinitely easier to edit, store and print, but I wrote and rewrote with none of the limitations imposed by pencil, paper and erasers. Another example is the leap from film to digital cameras. Modern digital cameras allow the photographer to take essentially unlimited numbers of pictures and to review them immediately. Discard the ones you don't want, then perfect (or ruin) the remaining images at home on your computer.

But it turns out that most of our gadgets that are bound for the trash were only improvements by degree, and some by very small degrees, indeed. As computers got faster and more powerful, we lusted after the newest generation of machine. I can recall becoming impatient with the slowness of one computer because I had to wait more than 30 seconds for a statistical calculation to be completed. The machine that replaced it did the job in 2 seconds. I wonder now that I could not tolerate the "waste" of my 28 other seconds. Perhaps I could have used them to think. In truth, even my most recent electronic calendar/address book/note-taker is only a slight improvement over my old pocket calendars. And the four generations of these gadgets only boast bigger screens (I can still read the smallest ones), better color (the monochrome of the earliest ones are actually easier to read in daylight), and more capacity (I never used up the capacity of even the smallest unit).

In the early 1900's the sociologist William Ogburn coined the term "cultural lag" to describe what happens when society fails to keep up with technological changes. New technologies must not only be adopted for use, but they must be understood and absorbed into the normal patterns of social life without causing disruptions. For example, Ogburn noted that as cars got faster and more powerful, roads that had been built for earlier cars became inadequate. The surfaces were bad and the curves were not banked, so lots of cars started spinning off the roads. Notice that the lag here is both technological and social. The roads needed improvement, but so did the driving skills of the people. And for more modern examples of cultural lag, think of cell phone use and driving accidents, or of the countless gadgets people buy, but never really master.

As the rate of technological change has accelerated, so has the rate of cultural lag. Some of this is the problem we have in learning about how to adopt and use new technologies. Do I need that new software, and can I learn it? But some of the challenge is how to control our lust for every new gadget, and to think realistically about which ones are worth the money and effort.

I wonder if a slimmer, higher capacity iPod would be worth the money? My old one looks kind of clunky.

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the *Bridgewater Review*.