The Emergence of Lifelogging and Thinglogging

Jim Gemmell

Introduction: Enabled by? A reason why?

In 1975, Microsoft crafted a vision statement calling for “a computer on every desk and in every home.” That sounds rather unremarkable today, but at the time it was far from obvious that it would actually happen. Virtually all homes and desks were without computers and most people had no desire for one. Looking back, Bill Gates commented:

“It’s very hard to recall how crazy and wild that was, you know, ‘on every desk and in every home.’ At the time, you have people who are very smart saying, ‘Why would somebody need a computer?’” (Academy of Achievement 2010)

Indeed, Ken Olsen, the founder of mini-computer powerhouse Digital Equipment Corporation, would still be saying in 1977 that “there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.”

Of course, computers did go onto virtually every desk and into more than 80% of homes in the USA (File and Ryan 2014), and Olsen was widely mocked for failing to see any “reason why.” But, in fairness, the reason why someone would want a computer in their home was not immediately clear in the 1970s. In 1975, Microsoft only sold the BASIC programming language for the Altair computer, and even Microsoft’s official history admits that there was “little you can actually do with the Altair.” (Microsoft News Center 2000) In fact, throughout the 1970s, not many people did want a personal computer. Less than six hundred thousand were sold in 1979 (Reimer 2005).

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In the 1980s, that began to change, at least in businesses. And the “reason why” was primarily word processing and spreadsheets. Figure 1 shows an 1983 ad from HP, leading with spreadsheets and word processing as the key features. Even Apple showed a spreadsheet on their screen while boasting that “Apple invents the personal computer. Again.” (Also in Figure 1) Spreadsheets and word processors were an excellent “reason why” to business people, in conjunction with a number of other fringe business programs. Consequently, PCs spread onto many desks in businesses just as Microsoft had wanted, but not much into homes. By 1989, 21 million PCs sold every year, yet only 15% of homes had a PC (Reimer 2005; US Census Bureau 2010).

It was in the 1990s that home PCs really took off, with the spread of the Internet, email and the World Wide Web giving people strong reasons to bring PCs into their homes. Mosaic, the first popular Web browser, was released in 1993, and ten years later 62% of American homes had PCs, and 55% had Internet access (US Census Bureau 2010). The Web was also yet another great reason for businesses, and overall PC sales soared after the mid nineties (see Figure 2).