

Smartphones? Tablets? Laptops? Some prefer noisy old machines

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.22.14

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Mariah Pospisil, 22, uses a typewriter at her home in Los Altos, Calif., on Aug. 15, 2005, saying that a computer and printer put too much between her and her writing. Photo: JIM GENSHEIMER/SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

WASHINGTON — Intense, driven, focused on detail, and slightly untidy, Ralph Nader looks like the original geek.

Nader helped protect consumers by advocating for seat belts in the 1960s and he also ran for president five times. Because he is famous, Nader has a large electronic footprint on the Internet and social media. But it turns out that Nader, who just turned 80, is so last century — maybe so last two centuries.

His latest book, “Unstoppable,” will soon be out, and like his previous 11 it was typed on a bulky manual typewriter. He doesn’t have a cellphone — “Why should I have a cellphone? I have people I don’t want to get phone calls from” — and his Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and email accounts are written by his employees, under strict guidelines.

“I’ve never seen them,” he said of his Internet accounts.

Nader is one of a small group of Americans who are digitally resistant. They avoid electronic communication — from computers to smartphones — as much as possible, even as the world goes digital. But there's another emerging group that's also turning to old technology: tech users distrustful of the level of electronic spying revealed by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden.

Some Worry About Electronic Spying

"After Snowden, how comfortable can anyone be putting their personal or professional life online, or even on their own computer?" asked Warren Sack. He is a software designer and media theorist. He teaches in the film and digital media department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

In a poll last month marking the 25th anniversary of the World Wide Web, the Pew Research Center found that 81 percent of U.S. adults use laptop and desktop computers at home, work, school or someplace else. The January poll of 1,006 Americans also found that 90 percent of all U.S. adults have cellphones, of which 58 percent are smartphones. In the 18-29 age group, 98 percent have cellphones, 83 percent of which are smartphones.

The Pew Research Center's Internet project found that 87 percent of U.S. adults use the Internet at least occasionally, 71 percent use it every day.

"This is a significant increase from the year 2000, our first measure, when just 29 percent of all adults said they went online on a typical day," according to Pew.

Young Man Falls In Love With Old Typewriters

In many ways, Jamie Patterson, 25, and Matthew Chojnacki, 27, are typical millennials. A young married couple, they grew up on the Internet and live a city life in Toronto.

"I was very much ingrained in the digital culture," said Chojnacki.

But after stumbling onto an estate sale one day, Chojnacki bought several typewriters and started fixing them up. Pretty soon, he and Patterson had a business: buying, restoring and selling typewriters on, of course, a website, OldFortTypewriterCo.com.

"It started out as a hobby, and so many people appreciated it that it became a side venture," Patterson said. In their day jobs they work for a local transportation agency.

They would lug the typewriters to a weekly "vintage night" at a local bar, where some people would type, others would knit and a disc jockey would — naturally — play vinyl records.

"It's got a romantic appeal to it," Chojnacki said of the typewriter. "It's all mechanical."

Jeff Hendrie, an 18-year-old high school senior in metropolitan Detroit, is something of an outlier. He lugs a typewriter to school every day and does just about everything the old-fashioned way. Before he typed, he wrote his papers in longhand. He uses a flip phone

and considers the U.S. mail “the most secure system.” He has an email account, out of necessity, but he isn’t on social media and teachers who usually send students their assignments by text will give them to him in person instead.

“Pretty much everyone, including myself and my parents, say I was born in the wrong era,” Hendrie said.

Old Telephones "Are Very Beautiful"

Lynne Joyrich is a professor of modern culture and media at Brown University, but she has a fondness for mid-20th-century devices, such as rotary phones.

“I keep them because they are very beautiful,” she said of her collection of old phones. Several work.

She has a smartphone to keep in touch with students but often forgets she has it, “for the pleasure of being able to be left alone.” And that ability to control whom you are in contact with matters more and more.

“In today’s world, there is more — and at the same time, less — comfort with surveillance and people being aware of what you’re doing,” she said.

New York City-based Laura Pitter, senior national security researcher at Human Rights Watch, a nonprofit group, said: “I’m much more careful about what I do online. I talk in person more now.”

She and others who monitor human rights worry about foreign governments watching them.

“People are keeping things in notebooks,” she said. “Even the most savvy people who work in this area find it’s very difficult to protect yourself.”

Investigative reporters are using disposable phones and are also going old-school, using fax machines to transmit material and scouting the few remaining pay phones in U.S. cities to reduce their electronic imprint.

Robert Thompson, a professor at Syracuse University who’s quoted frequently as a pop culture guru, has, somewhat surprisingly, a minimal online presence. He’s used his Facebook account once. Asked whether he was on Twitter, Thompson, the director of Syracuse’s Bleier Center for Television & Popular Culture, replied, “Definitely not.”

He added, “I get in enough trouble with what I say at faculty meetings.”

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence is LEAST important to include in a summary of the section labeled, "Young Man Falls In Love With Old Typewriters?"
 - (A) Before he typed, he wrote his papers in longhand.
 - (B) "It's got a romantic appeal to it," Chojnacki said of the typewriter.
 - (C) "Pretty much everyone, including myself and my parents, say I was born in the wrong era," Hendrie said.
 - (D) Pretty soon, he and Patterson had a business: buying, restoring and selling typewriters on, of course, a website, OldFortTypewriterCo.com.

- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST shows the author's central idea?
 - (A) Nader is one of a small group of Americans who are digitally resistant.
 - (B) "It started out as a hobby, and so many people appreciated it that it became a side venture," Patterson said.
 - (C) "In today's world, there is more and at the same time, less comfort with surveillance and people being aware of what you're doing," she said.
 - (D) But there's another emerging group that's also turning to old technology: tech users distrustful of the level of electronic spying revealed by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden.

- 3 The details of which section BEST connect the thoughts of those who avoid technology for privacy reasons to those who avoid it for personal enjoyment reasons?
 - (A) the first section (unlabeled)
 - (B) the section labeled, "Old Telephones Are Very Beautiful"
 - (C) the section labeled, "Some Worry About Electronic Spying"
 - (D) the section labeled, "Young Man Falls In Love with Old Typewriters"

- 4 The article connects using "old" and "new" technology in all these scenarios EXCEPT:
 - (A) a couple who sells old typewriters on an Internet website
 - (B) a high school student who blogs online about going low-tech
 - (C) an author who uses a landline but pays a staff to run his Internet accounts
 - (D) a college professor who loves old phones but teaches about modern culture and media

Answer Key

- 1 Which sentence is LEAST important to include in a summary of the section labeled, "Young Man Falls In Love With Old Typewriters?"
- (A) **Before he typed, he wrote his papers in longhand.**
 - (B) "It's got a romantic appeal to it," Chojnacki said of the typewriter.
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 - (C) "In today's world, there is more ? and at the same time, less ? comfort with surveillance and people being aware of what you're doing," she said.
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