

Published in *Editors' Notes*, 1.2 (Fall, 1982), 13-15.

How I Wasted \$4500 on a Microcomputer System

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In 1979 I organized for the CELJ [Council of Editors of Learned Journals] a "session" at the Modern Language Association convention on "The Journal Editor and the Microcomputer." The report I sent to *Editor's Newsletter* on that meeting was never published, and rather than publish it now, I think it would be more helpful just to set forth what my experience with them has been. All of these remarks are directed toward "micro" (that is, "home") computers, which for our purposes may be distinguished from "mini" or small business computers by their lower cost and potential versatility.

In 1978 I purchased a computer system (for those of you who want details, it was an 8085 system, 32K, one 8" IBM format disk), with the intention of using it to do a variety of editorial tasks. The first of these was mailing list maintenance, a considerable chore which I do personally; no commercial service wants to handle my minuscule and largely foreign list. I also intended to use it to do routine word processing, replacing my aging IBM MT/ST, the original word processing machine, which I bought in 1975, quite used, for \$2000. Other projected tasks were keeping track of articles and reviews published and generating indices, personal finance management, and some other personal tasks. (Typesetting and optical scanning are far beyond existing microcomputer technology.) This year, after giving up on getting it to do even one of the tasks I had envisioned for it, I sold it on a promise to pay \$1000, not yet received, and considered myself lucky; I was ready to give it away to a high school for a tax deduction. Some facts I learned the hard and expensive way might help others make wiser decisions.

I thought, in fact, that I was doing everything the "right" way. I was no beginner to computers; I had learned how to program and run my undergraduate university's IBM 1401, knew something of Fortran, and knew enough about electronics to have once held a broadcast engineer's license. I bought and read a book called *So You Want to Buy a Microcomputer*; I subscribed to a variety of small computer magazines and read back volumes of them in the library; I went to a national microcomputer trade show. I was confident enough about my skills to offer my services to others as

a consultant; I still think I would be able to consult on keyboard design, were anyone interested.

One part, though not the only part, of my troubles was my need for a machine which would handle Spanish as well as English. There was, and still is, no small computer, micro or mini, which does this as well as my \$100 portable typewriter. My system, if it had worked as planned, would have done this well, with a keyboard configuration and character shapes (on the screen) designed by myself. In many ways, it was to be top of the line.

One essential problem, and the point at which I got thoroughly disgusted with the entire industry, was equipment which refused to function as designed—indeed, function at all—and the total disinterest and, I believe, incapacity of the manufacturer to do anything about it. “The person who designed that product is no longer with us. Good luck!” is a verbatim quote.

Secondly, to be brief, is the inability of even quite expensive programs to do the sophisticated tasks I envisioned and which I think other editors might want. I researched mailing list programs carefully, at some considerable expense, buying \$20 manuals to evaluate the programs they described. I found, out after buying the program I thought best (NAD, from Structured Systems), which used codes like a commercial mailing list, making possible the generation of partial (expiring) subscriber lists, that it was not designed to accommodate foreign addresses, which are a substantial proportion of my subscribers, or even complicated academic addresses. This is symptomatic of small computer programs in general: if you never write more than 128 pages, if you only write English, if you never mail to a foreign country, if you have only one checking and one savings account, then you will be quite at home in the world as seen by the microcomputer industry.

I had no illusions about my ability to write a complicated mailing list program, which would in any event have been as prohibitive in time as doing my own typesetting. I thought I would be able to write smaller programs (in fact, I did write one to catalog my record library which worked well, but which was abandoned when I soon learned that such a catalog would much exceed the storage capacity of a disk), and to use some of the many programs published in magazines. That was when I found out that the Basic language, ostensibly a standard for the microcomputer industry, exists in as many dialects as Italian. I invested \$15 in a *Basic Encyclopedia* which purported to explain the differences among these dialects, and in fact it did explain one how to say “stop” and “print” in all of them, but about how to configure disk files, an essential task which different dialects handle differently, it had not a word. I also began to detect what I thought were errors in the manual for the top-of-the-line dialect

of Basic (CBasic II) I had purchased, but found no one who could tell me whether I, or the manual, was right. The person who had written it, I learned, was on a ship in the navy.

Rather than continue with this tale of woe, which is far from complete, let me present in summary form some of the hard facts about the microcomputer industry:

First, it is very hardware-oriented. That is, what stores want to sell you—indeed, must sell you—is a product in a box, and a program off the shelf. The prices they can charge do not permit extensive service.

Hardware is cheap, very cheap. For someone with unlimited time and the knack to take things apart and put them together (read “teenager”), a wonderful system can be put together for a ridiculously low figure; used and obsolete equipment is almost free. Buying new equipment is like buying a contact lens: the lens itself is cheap, but the time of the person to fill your eyes’ needs, rather than just sell you a lens, costs many times what the product does.

Second, the industry is short on people. This means that competent people’s time is at a premium, and you will be competing for it with others willing to pay any reasonable amount. It also means that people with marginal competence are found at higher levels of responsibility than they are in other, more slowly-growing industries.

Finally, the industry is quite chaotic, like the early days of the automobile or the recording industry. Small and undercapitalized companies come and go. Products become obsolete at a very rapid rate; this doesn’t just mean that they won’t do all the fancy tricks of the newer generation of products, but that service and parts may also be hard to find, and resale values are low. There are no national standards for programming languages, recording media, or my special interest, foreign language characters. (There are standards for the latter but the industry doesn’t follow them; IBM only does a mediocre job.) This means that you can purchase or exchange only those programs that are available to fit the machine you choose.

Let me emphasize again that the problem is basically one of people. The machines themselves, when they work, are wonderful, and cheap. Making them do the tasks you need to get done—and just as an editor’s concerns are sophisticated, complicated ones, these are sophisticated and complicated tasks—is quite another matter. Despite the spread of computer stores, to find someone who will sell you a system on the basis that it will do your tasks, rather than a prepackaged set of tasks, is, in my experience, impossible. I learned long after buying my system that the seller, who I chose because he was at the time the only local person who could repair microcomputer equipment, never understood quite

what I wanted. (“I’m not a typist.”) If you do as I did and buy hardware and software from different sources, which is almost unavoidable, be prepared for the hardware seller to blame the software, and the software seller the hardware, if problems arise. They can both be right, too.

What am I doing now? My subscriptions are still on cards, maintained by hand; the indices are assembled manually; routine letters are written manually when a printed notice will not suffice. I’m still using the MT/ST, now virtually valueless and not in top condition, but still running, and for \$75 an hour IBM will service it when necessary. I’m still using my \$100 portable typewriter, too.