Had enough of that crummy stuff

I recall, more than a decade ago, sitting in my tent in some boreal wilderness and being able to read my e-mail. To do so, all I needed was a small strap-on device that enabled my laptop to access the phone network. Back then, my IT department assured me that such accessories would soon be built in to all computers. And the advent of 3G promised high-speed, low-cost, hassle-free online access everywhere, allowing scientists on the move to read, think, write, consult, review, illustrate, analyse, and browse databases overflowing with useful information; and even book a spot in the next camp-ground on their itinerary. As the number of users and the amount of accessible content would grow, what was then an exotic excess would soon be affordable mainstream culture for academics and pretty much everyone.

Several laptops later, in the age of tablets, touch screens and 4G, has this dream come true? My own experience suggests otherwise. Superficially, when I struggle to submit a seriously overdue two-page report whilst on a train, in an airport or a quiet café, my fellow travellers seem contentedly at work. Surreptitious glances at their devices typically reveal no preponderance of blue screens, timeout messages or frantic random keystrokes, such as characterize my own laptop usage. But closer inspection often leads me to conclude that they have just given up and are simply reviewing their sales figures on a basic spreadsheet program v2003, rearranging their presentation for the next meeting, playing games designed for bored teenagers or watching a TV soap they already uploaded at home.

Almost nothing I was promised back in 2002 has really come to pass, except for the flood of other users who the phone companies nowadays blame for clogging up their system. Maybe I am just a hamfisted luddite

who can't string together a web address, download the latest unwanted media player upgrade or obey the stern warning not to press the back button. Or maybe I am the victim of public sector university purchasing policy, which forces me to invest in cheap, nearly obsolete and/or flaw-ridden hardware sourced from the most favoured cheapjack supplier.

Most free Wi-Fi seems close to being a pure scam. If connection doesn't fail completely, I often find myself instructed to disable my malware filter to be able to log on—presumably so they can send me lots of malware. Or free use is limited to half an hour after which you pay excessive rates for exceedingly slow connections and then have to pay yet more to upgrade—if it's even possible. Finland, the country that claims to have invented mobile telephony in its commercially viable form, now advertises free Wi-Fi on almost all rail services, accessed through the phone network. A marvel of technology. Except for the many occasions I have tried and failed to send even a single e-mail whilst riding the 175 km between Tampere and Helsinki.

Using the phone network directly is an even worse rip-off, despite the recently enacted EU rules on data roaming, which obviously don't apply in the 164 other countries in the world. Since you are charged by the byte, any software updates or security fixes, plus all the irritating ads you don't want, are not merely sent over the airwaves, blocking out downloads you actually do want, but you are forced to pay for them. And as prices for access abroad go down they seem to rise at home.

My own laptop has acquired a really infuriating bug. Whenever it falls idle for a half-minute or so it automatically disconnects from the network, despite asserting to the contrary, that is, that it remains connected.

A full reboot is often needed to restore service. Downloading a large document on the move is thus a virtual impossibility (sic). My IT guy says that it is a compatibility issue with current phone networks. Except that the new laptop I got to replace it suffered exactly the same problem.

Not surprising then that I have fallen victim to the proverbial 'thousand-dollar' phone bill on several occasions, due to repeated, partial delivery of huge amounts of data that produced no useful outcome whatsoever, and don't seem to be stored anywhere on my computer.

A year or so ago, in naive exasperation, I summoned the regional manager of a major phone company to my office, to try to explain what services I wanted, where I wanted them and how much I was prepared to pay. I hoped that he could put together a package to suit my needs. When I explained that I might often need to deliver or work on a 20 MB document with a dozen co-authors in different countries, whilst on a trip to Japan, he shrugged and said that just wouldn't be possible. It felt like I was asking him to organize me a private tour to the moons of Jupiter.

Even if the internet was originally invented by and for us, the world's scientists, the sad fact is that it has developed in a completely different direction, and the crummy stuff on offer just doesn't add up to anything useful. Perhaps it is time to start again from scratch, establishing a purely academic, transnational network, that truly serves our needs. Is anyone out there listening? Or will this electronic cry for help disappear into the void, like my latest manuscript, laptop upgrade order or camp-ground reservation?

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