

by Derek Morrison

*A world of digital complexity
Where only experts can tune TV
Gullible swallowing of salesman's art
A rush to devices with moniker 'smart'
But like filament light bulbs of old
Rapid obsolescence we're being sold
Because the smartness does degrade
Despite the high prices we have paid
Those smart devices by our side
Have software jigsaws deep inside
Comes a point of no app update
Smartness failing – so now contemplate
Not wise to fall under salesman's thumb
Buy simpler devices – they're better dumb.*

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SmartDumbness.mp3>

Commentary

The stimulus for this little piece of doggerel was Charles Arthur's piece in the Guardian [You buy the TV, Google 'upgrades' its software and then YouTube doesn't work](#) (Charles Arthur, Guardian, 4 May 2015).

I have immense sympathy with those struggling to understand how they device that appeared to work so well just the day before, either ceases to work completely, or now seems to dropping functional bits in a manner reminiscent of a glacier at the point it meets the sea.

I once had an elderly neighbour who I discovered had ceased to watch her television because the channels she preferred had 'disappeared'. Of course, in our digital age, new channels appear and some disappear; consequently, periodic retuning is necessary. Try explaining the

process to someone who just wanted to switch it on and press a channel number like she used to be able to; so she became dependent on someone to undertake this periodic task for her.

I bought a 'smart' DVD player, i.e. it has custom apps that enable it to access one or more internet services. The problem is that this 'smart' model player has now been replaced by an even smarter one and so my one's apps no longer update; so it gets dumber by the day.

My venerable Apple iPhone 3GS is still in pristine physical condition – in my opinion it was the best physical form factor of all the iPhones – but, bit-by-bit its apps (which after all are the source of the smart in smartphone) can no longer update because they require the latest and greatest, i.e bloated, version of the operating system. There will of course come a point where this smartphone will become so dumb that it will become just a phone and media player. That's not such a bad thing though. While I understand the need for markets to be constantly renewed so that innovation is stimulated, the modern consumer becomes uniquely vulnerable to exploitation when the critical functionality of their physical devices is totally dependent on potentially ephemeral software over which they have no real control. In that situation we are all just one update away from being switched off.

In a recent posting in my other blog [VeloScience](#) I offered a [review of a device called the Fly6](#), a rear-facing safety video camera and light for attachment to a bicycle. The Fly6 is a good illustration of the benefits of keeping things simple, i.e. you turn it on and it does only two things; it flashes a light and it records what's happening behind you. Now that's smart.