

COG Magazine Notes for July - September 2017

All the magazines reviewed below are held in the SeniorNet office and the Wellington Public Library, and are available for borrowing.

TECHLife Australia (July)

It is in the nature of computers that, after an indeterminate length of time, they fail. Those essential components, keyboards and mice are nicely placed to prove this – and more often than convenient, they do. Replacing these particular devices is not difficult – down to Noel Lemming's! But, once there, how to choose from among the many on display? This issue of TECHLife has useful advice. It says that the key things to be aware of in buying budget keyboards and mice are to check whether you can get a combo pack; decide whether you prefer wireless or not; think about whether you need Bluetooth; determine the best size keyboard and mice for your hands; ask whether software is bundled; and decide how many buttons you want on your mouse. The article reviews the latest keyboards and mice and should be consulted if you're in this market (pp. 24 – 27).

We are constantly being told that today's smartphone cameras are so good that our expensive, heavy and bulky single lens reflex units are no longer required. (This may be true but until I see an effective, powerful telephoto lens built into a smart phone, I may permit myself a degree of hesitation in this area.) Whatever the case, I have noticed that there are many apps on offer for sharper smartphone photography. This issue contains a good survey of them (pp. 28 – 30). One, which is culturally significant, reflects an interesting trend among the young which is to photograph one's meal in order to prove that you are eating more expensively than your friends. In this context I should mention a new app, "Foodie – Delicious Camera" (p. 30). The review of it says that this programme has "an array of filters designed to make even the greasiest kebab look deliciously mouth-watering ... Finished images can be saved and shared on social media for approval from others." Now you know.

Buying a new TV is, this issue assures us, "more of a minefield than ever". So here is a helpful, white-flagged guide: "The best TVs of 2017: the complete TV buyer's guide" (pp. 65 – 74). If you're in the market, it is undoubtedly essential reading.

The law adduced above about computers breaking down is, despite the protestations of some Apple owners, also true of their equipment. (Though to be fair, I think their machines may have fewer problems than their Windows counterparts.) Whatever, the adage is be prepared, and TECHLife has a valuable article here, "Fix a bjorked iMac or MacBook: we

run down the tools that'll get you out of a sticky situation if your Mac won't start" (pp. 96 – 97). Think of it as insurance.¹

TECHLife Australia (August)

More than a few SeniorNet members come to our sessions asking for help with photos – particularly organising them. There's an article here that could be a great help: it's "Get started with Windows 10's photos app" (pp. 88 – 89). (I've photocopied it.)

E-commerce, anyone? If you are diffident about dipping your toes into this particular water, SeniorNet can help you. We run courses on how to use TradeMe - and here, in this issue, is a useful article on eBay. It's called – "eBay expert: how to make online purchases like the pros". Paragraph headings include "search like a pro"; "search operators"; "find the best price"; "review"; "buying local vs overseas"; "payments"; and "sniping" (pp. 28 – 29).

Keeping your phone charged when you're out and about is a challenge. It's less of a challenge when you're in the car. Car chargers are useful accessories. There's a relevant review article here, "Affordable USB car chargers" (pp. 30 – 33). As well as providing detailed reviews, it makes an important general point: "when you're plugging in an expensive device such as a smart phone, it makes no sense to risk a dodgy charger, even if the chances of damage are very low". So the key recommendation is to try and get a branded device, and the point's made that it's worth spending a bit extra to have more than one USB port available. Keep a spare cable in the glove box.

Australian Personal Computer (July)

¹ When I read the title of this article I must admit that I paused over the word "bjorked". It was not one known to me. Showing my age, I went first of course to my Concise Oxford. Despite what I sensed was an interesting Anglo-Saxon influence, there was no help there. Then it occurred to me to be modern, to search online. This was a process. Google delivered a proper noun – Bjork. This, it explained, is the name of an Icelandic singer who "released her first album at 11. She was in many bands, then split to pursue her solo career, releasing her first international album, Debut. The hit single from the album was called Human Behaviour ..." (see <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Bjork>). Now all this information was certainly interesting, if not particularly helpful. But the onomatopoeia from the word "bjorked" suggested not only something Scandinavian, but also something broken. So I hunted on. And then, the Urban Dictionary delivered the goods. Its definition of "bjorked" is as follows:

"A colloquial augmentation of the phrase 'borked', meaning 'broken beyond repair' or 'cream cracked'. 'Bjorked' means ultimately the same thing as 'borked', but has a much nicer Icelandic-sounding ring to it. It is especially effective when referring to under-performing **people** or products from Scandinavia."
(<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bjorked>)

This issue has a major review article on solid state drives - - "Super-cheap SSDs" (pp. 54 – 59). It's a very thorough review but, as I read it, I was questioning its major premise. It said "simply switching your OS drive from a comparatively slow mechanical hard disk drive ... be it 5400 rpm, 7200 rpm or even 10,000 rpm – to a solid-state drive can make a huge, positive difference to how you work or play." Let's think about that. Well now, I suppose if you choose to measure your life in milli-seconds, then this could be true. But how many of us are in that unfortunate category? I happily am not; I am well content with standard-issue hard disk drives, and, if you are like me, you would certainly admire the technical capacity which produces solid-state drives, but would not see them as particularly relevant to most SeniorNet members.

Of much more appeal to our community is the article, "Get to grips with the new Skype" (pp. 68 – 70). What has happened is that the Windows 10 Creators update has overhauled the long-standing and well-received Skype programme. It is free and many of us use it to keep in touch with family and friends. The intention of this article is to show us how to get the best out of the updated programme. As you would expect, the article is informative, well-illustrated and laid out, and certainly looks competent. But, we wondered, was it field tested? We in our household decided to give it a go. We spent three-quarters of an hour on it – which is more than enough. But all that glitters is not gold. Consider: we used the previous version of Skype successfully for three or four years. We have recently installed the new version of Skype, and have studied the article under review - precisely in order to "get to grips with the new Skype". But we are now in need of the Clinic; because it is no longer clear to us how to make a Skype telephone call. Old hands see this sort of thing happening quite often in computing. They suggest that in order to help maintain their employment, computer engineers must be seen to be upgrading and "improving" their programmes. But in so doing, they often detract from the essence of the programme - which is of course that, whatever its function, it must be accessible, simple - and it must work. Unfortunately, for us at least, the new Skype has muddied what used to be clear waters.

Bill Gates is the richest man in the world. The company he founded, Microsoft, has made him so. And most of us have contributed generously to both man and behemoth. But I hear the voice of common sense asking – should we go on doing so? Consider Microsoft Office. It is a familiar friend on our Windows computers. We act as though it is an essential companion in our computing experience. Therefore we are prepared to pay handsomely for it. But if SeniorNet does nothing else, it must tell members that there is a free and highly competent alternative. It is called LibreOffice. It is an impressive programme, and I underline that, not only is it free – but it is fully compatible with Microsoft Office. There is an article in this issue which tells you "How to switch to LibreOffice" (pp. 76 – 78). Softwarecity.co.nz is currently selling Microsoft Office Home and Business 2016 for \$159.00. So that is the

opportunity cost of ignoring the Australian Personal Computer's invitation to break with habit and to adopt this free and well-tested programme. Turn the page?

Miscellaneous intelligence:

- a) this issue estimates that when Amazon sets up in Australia, its presence there will force local bricks-and-mortar tech retailers to drop some prices by around 10 percent to compete. Our New Zealand retailers will expect some flow on effects.
- b) Google has reportedly brought its word error rate in its speech recognition technology down from around 40 percent (2012) to now 4.9 percent. That's an impressive achievement and makes speech recognition a very useful tool.

PC&Tech Authority (July)

The word "free" has a special resonance. This is particularly so in SeniorNet circles, and the present issue has an article designed to appeal. It is "Best Free Software Part 2: 25 downloads to secure your PC, help you code, and keep you entertained" (pp. 28 – 35). Well, we can start refining. Most of us are not interested in coding, and ideas on what is entertaining are highly personal. So that gets rid of quite a few recommendations. What's left? I'll list the most relevant to our interests. They are: AdwCleaner, Avast Free Antivirus, Junkware Removal Tool, Secunia PSI, Unchecky, VeraCrypt, Google Chrome, LibreOffice, Opera and VLC Media Player. These are good programmes and, if you want them, you could certainly download them (get Unchecky first!). Otherwise, you could just borrow this magazine. All these programs (and those I haven't mentioned) are on its accompanying disk.

Buying a new phone can be an expensive business. At SeniorNet, members often ask for advice in this area. Certainly our experts can help, but members should also cast more widely, reading reviews on the net, and in relevant magazines. This month's issue is a case in point. It has an excellent article, "Pocket Money Value Smart Phones... We round up the 11 handsets that offer high quality at a low price point" (pp. 64 – 83). A few key points:

- "... we wouldn't hesitate to recommend a great lower-or mid-range smart phone over an overpriced flagship
- "... it's generally better to go with an older flagship rather than a new budget phone"
- "... most phones [batteries] fail around the 12-hour mark, which indicates [an] ability to make it through a full day of normal use on a single charge" ; and

- "... aim for a minimum of 32 GB of integrated memory, ideally with microSD as a fallback"

PC&Tech Authority (August)

The lead articles in this issue are on Windows 10 S (pp. 24 – 31). Now you may not have heard of this program. I join you in that. So, what is it? This magazine says that "it's Windows 10 without the ability to install whatever you like... A locked-down operating system that can only install apps from [Microsoft] Store". Well, that wasn't enough information for me. However, the penny dropped when it was explained that it's intended as a competitor for the Chrome operating system. Some people say that Windows 10 S is aimed at the schools' market; others note that it's been installed on Microsoft's high-end Surface Laptop. The article seems in two minds as to whether the ordinary computer user needs to be concerned about it. I'm not sure that we do, and, to me, the crucial point that emerges is that people who have bought the "S" version can, by paying an extra \$US 49, upgrade to Windows 10 Pro.

More inviting was the article "Supercharge your Wi-Fi" (pp. 64 – 74). The invitation to consider one's Wi-Fi system (modem, router and all) is appealing – "welcome to the future. The future with no dropped packets, no dead patches, no moving your laptop a few inches to get a better connection... Wireless technology has moved on... Do you stick with the tried and tested, but not always effective? Or do you invest in a new way to do Wi-Fi?" (pp. 64 – 74). Well, this could be the article you're waiting for. Not only does it tell you what to look for in a Wi-Fi router, but it offers 12 in-depth reviews of some of the best equipment on the Australasian market.

Let us imagine that you have paid good money for an Office 365 package. And that you understand that unlike, say, Microsoft Office 2007, you don't own it - you're renting it. Accordingly, there is a powerful incentive to get the best out of this suite of programmes. But how? Well, Jon Honeyball has made it his mission to tell you how to get the most out of your subscription (pp. 76 – 79). If you thought using this programme was intuitive: think again. There's a lot of good advice here. As he says, "if you treat [Office 365] in the same way as we treated the first release of Office in the 1990s, then there is a great deal of capability that you will be missing out on". Unfortunately he's right.

There's another article here which may have some highly focused appeal. It is "The 19 best command prompt commands" (pp. 80 – 83). Now, I hear you wonder, to whom might this appeal? After all, the whole point of the Windows graphical interface was to get rid of the necessity of using DOS commands. But if your interest is in ancient languages (and there are people who obtain intense enjoyment from them), then this well-structured, albeit arcane article could well be a reminder of what we

used to do – and what most of us are very glad we no longer have to. May I remind you: “mblink /d c:\docs c:\users\PC TA\documents”?

Australian Personal Computer (August)

The lead article is “The ultimate PC and laptop accessories mega guide” (pp. 51 – 73). This is a major piece of work. There’s advice and reviews on docs, callers, stands, risers, USB – C accessories, home servers, and power banks. It’s thorough and professional, and for those on the hunt, essential.

More than a few of us carry around flash drives. They are easily lost, so it’s good practice to encrypt the files on them. There’s an article here “How to encrypt a USB flash drive” (p. 75) which makes the point that free versions of USB encrypters are not always easy to use. However, there is a programme called Rohos Mini Drive which allows you “to create a hidden and encrypted storage container up to 8 GB in size”. This seems all that most people would need, and it is noted that it doesn’t delete the existing files on the drive. To get this programme, go to www.rohos.com.

TECHLife Australia (September)

“PC going well?” is a familiar opening greeting in SeniorNet circles, and the well-focused feature article in this issue is “How to fix your PC problems” (pp. 71 – 83). Over the years I’ve read many such articles. This one is exceptionally good. It’s wide-ranging and practical: many of us would benefit from reading it.

Smart phones are amazing devices with extraordinary functions built into them. One of those functions is a movie camera. But some SeniorNet members (including myself) are very reluctant to use this feature. Why? It’s usually because we don’t know enough about making movies to go down this road. Well, here is an article to change all that. It is entitled “Ways to shoot better smart phone video” (pp. 80 – 83). Key advice is: landscape, not portrait; use maximum resolution; get your de-shake on; use H. 264 video compression; set anti-flicker; use an external mic; no digital zoom is good zoom; use airplane mode; ensure sufficient storage; charge the battery; manually set exposure; beware the audio levels; follow the guidelines; use a tripod; remember the [thirds] rule; boot then shoot; no filters or effects; shoot in good light; and clean the lens. These headings from the article are fully explained in useful commentary.

There is value too in the article “Give your old Android a new lease of life” (pp. 96 – 97). Suggestions include using your former phone as a universal remote; an IP camera; a 3G modem; a vehicle tracker; and a

virtual reality viewer. How to do all these things is of course spelled out in the article.

TECHLife Australia is a home for excellent reviews. This issue has a feature on multifunction printers – often called multifunction centres (MFCs). These combine a number of useful devices: printer, scanner, photocopier, and often a fax machine. The buyers' checklist provided is very useful. It includes the following headings: automatic document feeder; fax; connection options; USB cable; separate ink cartridges; speed; size; and Cloud printing. There's a very useful box entitled "The ins and outs of ink: should you stick with ink or toner from your printer maker, or is it safe to buy third-party refills?" (p. 65). We need to know.

Your eleven-year old grandson is at an unfortunate stage. He is contemplating his future, and is under the impression that if Manchester United doesn't want him, he could fall back on being a wealthy rock musician. He is realistic enough to acknowledge that his aversion to team games probably won't get him into his primary school's First XI, so he's looking to music. Apart from the monetary aspect, he knows little about music (let alone theory!) and so has asked you, with your knowledge of computer-assisted learning, for help. And there is help. There's a well-tuned, short article here - "Learning music by Ableton" (p. 43). This discusses a digital audio workstation developed by Ableton. It is "a free web resource [which has created] an incredibly clear and interactive set of lessons in musical theory. Starting from the absolute fundamentals (such as defining rhythm and melody), the lessons steadily progress all the way through to some more advanced concepts ..." Just for fun, I tried this. (See learningmusic.ableton.com.) And it was fun, and I learned much more than I expected, and you may have launched your grandson's career.

Let's end on a high note. The whole purpose of my reading these magazines - and of you reading what I've written about them - is to find something of interest. On thinking about it, I would rephrase that to say something of "high interest" - but we mustn't deal with superlatives. Even so, once or twice a year something comes along which presents as surprisingly good. Now I haven't field tested the following site, but, on paper, it could worth looking at. It is www.crackle.com. This issue says (p.98) that Crackle provides "a significant library of movies and TV shows for absolutely free ... A lot of the content is B-level at best or simply very old, but there are quite a few awesome classics to be found there as well. It's always worth exploring." The most immediate question we would ask is, of course, is it legitimate? My limited research online suggests that it is, but a good rule of thumb is, as always, to be cautious and to do your own due diligence.