

From Technical Skills to Socio-ethical Technical Understanding

My journey from interfacing with computers to encouraging technological multiliteracy

By Eric Franzen

Formative Years

Primary and secondary school ~1980 - 1987

I have been fortunate to have access to digital technology my entire life. I was introduced to computers in elementary school where I typed on a Commodore Pet computer. My parents were insightful enough to realize my affinity for computers and purchased a Commodore 64 computer, and later a Macintosh 512k form home use. Engaging with these devices was like an interface into science fiction. They were new, futuristic, and fun to work on. Typing certain words into code made actions take place on screen. *If/then* was an exciting portrayal of simple logic. Access and encouragement by parents and teachers, and my own innate curiosity and propensity for technological devices, set the foundation for how I would embrace technology for the rest of my life.

Career

Graphic design and publishing ~1991 - 2026

My professional life began in publishing – first in print and then online. I began work in a field that was just then aggressively evolving technologically – desktop publishing/graphic design. My background in computer usage allowed me to easily adapt to new technologies including graphic design software on newer Macintosh computers. I witnessed a contrast with those who were trained in more conventional methods, and who struggled with accepting computer technology as a new tool. I progressed through graphic design to online and other publishing communications technologies. The Internet came into being and I was fortunate to be able to learn how to adapt quickly to the devices used in web publishing. Everything was able to be communicated instantly (versus printed on paper) and excitement abounded over being able to *interact* with customers and message receivers. A more robust communication cycle was possible and those customers who patronized the printing shop I worked with were now excited to show clothing, cars, and other merchandise in an arena that provided them feedback. Over the years, I have witnessed many digital communications changes, both large and small, and having comfortability with technological change has afforded me confidence through each new phase.



Technology in Society

The importance of digital inclusion ~2015 - present

As I progressed in my career, I came to realize that I was driven by an interest in the interplay between communication and technology. As I developed my skills and knowledge in tech, I became acutely aware of the digital divide. I remember volunteering with an elementary school literacy project where computers were never introduced due to funding concerns. Asking children about experiences with computers generated perplexed looks and wonder. Computer access for me as a child aided me in reading as I played games that were text heavy. Barriers to tech access were real back then, but not necessarily insurmountable. Denying access to children today influences their ability to read and interact with the world. Availability, affordability, and training in new digital communications technologies are definitely a challenge in a *digital* culture. However, I have realized that I want to do something about it and I believe I can.

I pursued an academic and professional path where I could focus on the relationship between culture and technology, including how technology is part of how we sense, experience, and move through the world. My experience with technology, specifically computers, formed the bedrock of who I am and how I perceive reality. It encouraged me to learn, inspired me to use technology to support myself, and offered me sight into the future of what can be. I am interested in the multitude of elements that influence what a person perceives when connecting through digital communication and why this experience is not necessarily available to everyone. To that end, I have self-taught myself to refurbish used technology components and provide them to those who greatly benefit from the assistance.

While teaching a course on basic computer connectivity, I had an opportunity to interact with a young man about 10 years old. The same age I was when I encountered that exciting Pet computer so many years ago. I donated a laptop to the young person and showed him how to connect to the internet. I asked him what kinds of things he did with computers at school and what he thought they could do for him. I encouraged him to go home and look up things he did not know on the internet. I agreed that playing games on a computer was fun but reminded him that there was so much more the computer was capable of. I asked him where he thought computers would be in future years. Training and helping users feel comfortable with digital technology is a natural next step for me. A lifetime of love for technology has helped me and I want to help others realize the same perspective. Either with simple access like I had, or with encouragement and training to help them understand the power communications technologies can have.

