

## LIFELONG LEARNING: WHY YOU NEED TO BE ONLINE

I've been a volunteer in the PSRC computer lab for about four years. It keeps me off the streets, though I admit downtown Plainsboro is fairly docile at night. Besides, as a senior, I get sleepy at 8 p.m.

Also, I enjoy helping folks of any age use their smart phones, tablets, and computers. Of all the inventions during my lifetime, nothing compares to the transformation of information and communications from analog to digital—from paper to disk, from wires to fiber optic cables, from the TV in a wooden box that sits on the floor to a flat screen that hangs on the wall, from the wired phone on your desk to the wireless phone in your pocket. I still enjoy holding a physical book and flipping through my glossy *Astronomy* magazine, but for pure knowledge power, the Internet's immense store of information and speed-of-light delivery to any computer or mobile device anywhere in the world is without equal.

In his seminal book, *The World is Flat*, now in its third revision, author Thomas Friedman explains that digital technology allows us to "...reach farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before... giving so many people the tools and ability to connect, compete, and collaborate." Indeed, if we don't bring computers (or tablets or smart phones) into our day-to-day lives, we'll be left in the dust because everyone else in the world is online—talking, texting, and Tweeting. The Internet and digital technology has replaced the "dial" telephone with the smart phone, including video. Remember the AT&T PicturePhone from the 1960s? Your smart phone can do that today—for free!

Now, some folks tell me they don't believe in texting, or don't like E-mail, or reading news from a computer or tablet. But the point is that most everyone else does—including your family. That's how your children and grandchildren communicate and learn about the world. If you're waiting for them to call you or send you photos of their vacation in the mail, forget it. Cameras don't use film. The pictures of your niece or nephew are available on Facebook. They'll text you. You can always call them.

Google lets you search myriad information sources about any subject imaginable. YouTube provides millions of videos that range from aardvarks to zithers, Ansel Adams to Picasso, Beethoven to Beyoncé, live "streams" of press conferences and programs, and how to take apart your toaster. (Step 1: Unplug your toaster.) Study Botticelli's "Venus on the Half-shell" at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Italy, not New Jersey) on your laptop, or sign up for university lectures through Coursera—for free!

Most newspapers and magazines offer on-line versions that include videos and narration (“The Economist” can read itself to you.) The New York Times and Wall Street Journal update their digital content throughout the day, and include videos and graphics not available in their newsprint versions. PBS Newshour is available on YouTube. The range of on-line news, opinions, and facts at your fingertips is orders of magnitude greater than anything that’s ever been available. (Anyone want to buy my 1980’s edition of World Book? How about my 1973 World Almanac?)

McCaffrey’s is bringing on-line grocery shopping to its stores. Amazon.com, which is actually a marketplace, sells thousands of items from thousands of manufacturers, and delivers them to you—sometimes the same day. If you want to shop at the Quakerbridge Mall, you can summon a ride from Uber or Lyft from your smart phone.

There’s no need to mail paper checks when your bank provides an on-line bill-pay service—for free! I’ve been doing this for the last 20 years.

Our parents welcomed radio in the 1920s, dial telephones in the 1930s, and televisions in the 1950s. Now it’s our turn to welcome the digital world. Talk about lifelong learning! I love it.

If you need help with your laptop, tablet, mobile phone, or camera, stop by PSRC’s computer lab on Tuesdays from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., Wednesdays from 1:30 to 4:00 p.m. and Fridays from 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon.