

Podcast: BiblioTech

Episode: 10

Title: Much ado about hardware

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Intro

Welcome to Episode 10 of BiblioTech - the podcast about emerging technologies for academics.

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This podcast is brought to you by University Affairs magazine. My name is Rochelle Mazar, and I am an emerging technologies librarian at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Every month you can listen in as I talk about what's new in technology and what we as academics should be paying attention to. It's hard to keep up all of the new software, tools and gadgets. That's where I come in.....

Whether you like it or not, your computer needs have changed over the last few years. You are now in the unique position to match hardware to your specific needs and wants. There is no need to carry around that 10-pound laptop when you go to conferences, or to be tethered to your desktop whenever you are in your school's library.

In this episode I let you know about the different hardware options available to you. And yes, I do include tablets and mobile devices. Come on, you're ready to take the leap, right?

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At some point, you will make a choice about buying yourself a computer. Wait, let me rephrase that: you will make a choice (or choices) about the computing device (or devices) you need to do your work effectively.

That choice used to be a lot easier.

What we used to do is just buy the best computer they make. The top of the line. Every few months there was something bigger, better, and faster, so it made perfect sense to buy the best computer you could afford in order to futureproof yourself. At least for the next two to three years. I look around campus and see that a lot of people are still doing this. That breaks my heart a little, because that's no longer required. The best computer they offer may not be the best computer for you.

As with anything else, you need to look at the field of computing options available to you and make an educated choice based on your specific needs. It's not as simple as buying the most expensive computer in the shop. And of course, that's a good thing!

From desktops and laptops to netbooks, iPads and tablets, all the way over to smartphones: you have a wide range of options. All of these things have their pros and cons. Your best solution might be any one or any group of these. You're in a position now to really match the hardware to your actual needs and wants. So how do you choose?

For the most part, we all started out with desktops. They were faster, cheaper, and had better storage capacity. There was a time when buying a laptop was an iffy option. They were heavy and awkward and you got a lot less computing power for a much bigger price tag. But the idea of portability was appealing. In recent years, I've noticed a marked shift away from desktop computers in academia. Everyone seems to have a laptop, and with good reason. We have places to go. We have home offices and offices on campus, we work in the library or in the local Starbucks, we travel for conferences and for research purposes, and we want access to everything we need everywhere we are. It makes sense. Laptops can be hooked up to an external monitor and keyboard, so you can get all the functionality of a desktop with the portability of a laptop. It seems like a great idea. A laptop can be pretty much anything you need it to be; in the 90s, before the birth of the iPod, I used to take my laptop on the greyhound, keep it half open and running, and listen to mp3s on it with headphones. The laptop is the Swiss army knife of computing. Very practical.

As the cost of computers and devices comes down, and as we get a better grip on what our actual computing need are, we don't need a Swiss army knife of a computer anymore. The playing field as changed. You can tailor your devices to your needs. So what do you really need?

A desktop computer seems almost retro at this point. I don't know too many people who use them frequently. However, I suspect the humble desktop computer may soon see a resurgence. Why? If you choose a laptop for mobility, you may soon find yourself the only person walking around with one. With all the other devices available that are mobile friendly, why carry a whole laptop around? It's expensive and easily broken, its significant screen real estate means that everyone sitting near you can see what you're working on, and the tappity tap of the keys can annoy your colleagues or fellow conference goers. It's tricky to use a laptop on the bus, or on a plane. (Is it just me, or is that tray table getting smaller?) Do you really need all that power when you're on the train between one place and another? Do you need all that power, all that hard drive space, and a copy of Photoshop while you're sitting in an airport lounge? Probably not.

The rise of mobile devices, ironically, is exactly why I think a desktop is becoming a feasible and even desirable option again. A desktop computer could be like your home base. If you are lucky enough to have an office, either at work or at home, where you do the bulk of your work, a laptop isn't necessarily what you're looking for. You want the vast space and power of a desktop; you want the gigantic screen. Desktop computers are a lot cheaper than they used to be, so you get more bang for your buck. If you hardly ever intend to do that work anywhere but that room, a desktop is a great idea. But you get yourself a desktop with a set of mobile devices, too. Because you need to be mobile.

What sort of mobile device? There are so very many choose from! If you want a traditional keyboard and software, you can get yourself a netbook. Netbooks are great conferences, airplanes, buses, trains, and other time you're seated for an extended time. It's a tiny laptop that can connect to your home base desktop computer and do most of the basic tasks you need without the cost of a full laptop. With a Wi-Fi connection and the use of cloud services (like Google docs), it's tiny hard drive isn't an issue. The netbook niche is growing: Google's chromebook has the form factor of a traditional laptop, but acts more like a netbook. It's designed to be an interface to the web exclusively, using a browser as the operating system. On the more expensive side, apple's MacBook air is sliding into this computing niche as well. Slim and light, with innards that has more in common with a USB flash drive than a whirring hard drive, the air is a fully functional computer that's extremely portable. The netbook class of devices is stripping down the bells and whistles of a regular computer in order to make something easy to carry, use in a small space, and access the internet. It's also the choice for people not ready to do something completely different.

But completely different it out there too. The truth is, you often don't need a full keyboard. On a plane, at a conference, travelling: you need to read and answer your email, connect with colleagues and friends, browse the internet, take notes, tweet. For these kinds of activities, you don't need a full copy of Photoshop and 500 gigabytes of storage space. And you don't need a thousand dollar machine to babysit, either. What fits this niche? A few things. For some, a mobile phone does the trick. Blackberry, Nokia, Android, iPhone: any of these can do these basic tasks. Phones are great for the 3G access; you can answer your email and browse the web even at a conference that doesn't provide free wireless. The small form factor means you can slip it in your pocket and not worry about heavy computer bags. You're freed from the boat anchor of a laptop. But for some the screen real estate is a little too small.

This is where the iPad, Blackberry's playbook and the android galaxy tablet fit in. I think of these as the mobile devices for North America: here, we're only so mobile. We don't do our computing when we're standing up, mostly. We do it while we're sitting down. Our lives are largely moving from one seating area to another. Buses, trains, airports, conferences, meetings, more meetings, then a few more meetings after that. We get up and move to a new room, and then we sit for an hour or more. For those circumstances, you want a device that's relatively easy to move around and not too heavy, but something that's big enough to work with comfortably while seated. The biggest advantage of these devices in a meeting setting is the lack of screen to stand up like a miniature wall between you and everyone else. tablet devices are low profile, non-disruptive, and silent. You can use the software keyboard to tap out your notes, check your email, and browse without disturbing anyone around you. I've been in meetings where everyone in the room has an iPad and you can hardly even tell. Very slick, very sophisticated, and no more noticeable than a pad of paper. iPads are also great on airplanes. Bring your own movies, and you can eat your meal at the same time!

Personally, at work, I would prefer to have a desktop computer. I spend a lot of hours in a week sitting and working in my office; portability isn't an important factor there. Now, this isn't to say that there still isn't a place for a full laptop. My personal home computer is a laptop, primarily because I refuse to turn a room in my home into an office. I'd prefer to set up and work in any room, and be able to slide my

computing device under the couch or into a drawer if I don't want to see it. I like to work on my couch, or on my patio, or in a cafe across the street. I do a lot of writing, so I want a full keyboard and I want to be able to set up shop anywhere I go. Because of the ways in which I prefer to work, a laptop is a good personal solution for me. However, my laptop is not my mobile device. I use my phone on the bus, on the street when I'm working out directions, and as my internet-enabled camera while I'm out for a walk. I use an iPad in meetings, on the train, and on airplanes. I bring it with me to conferences in place of my laptop, and it fits in my purse.

Do you need all of these things? No. You certainly don't. But you can mix and match devices based on what you do need. Are you very mobile? Consider all your mobile computing options before sinking all your cash into a high-end laptop. Where and how do you do the bulk of your work? In one place, or several? How do you work best? Do you travel a lot? What kinds of computing tasks do you need to accomplish while travelling? Do you sit in a lot of meetings? Is your shoulder getting a dent in it from carrying around a heavy laptop bag?

People who sell computers probably love the fact that there is still a tendency to buy the most expensive computer available. But you don't need it. Look carefully; consider your options. You have more of them now than ever before.

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Goodbye

That's it for this episode. What devices do you use while on the road? Let me know by posting a comment at the bottom of this podcast's page at [University Affairs dot CA](http://UniversityAffairs dot CA). Until next time, I'm Rochelle Mazar.