Barbara Sehr

Barbara Sehr has a steady algorithm that dances to a different aerial density. OK, she's a funny technical writer who brings out her recently diminished profile, her artificial intelligence, and her native German sense of humor. Despite all that, she is not only funny — she is the only known journalist to interview Bill Gates as both a male and female reporter. Visit her Web site: www.liftingthefog.com

How IBM's PC Blessing Changed the World (And Me)

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It was a day that would change the world — even on a Dog Day morning in mid-August.

However, unlike the stories of war, pestilence, and mass murder that typically grab attention, few of us called to a press conference on this Thursday morning in August 1981 took much notice. As a nascent writer in the brave new world of high technology, I thought it would be just another company news conference about a technical gizmo to which I had never given a thought.

Little did I know that this press conference would change my life nearly as much as the two-week-old daughter I left at home that morning — not to mention the life of everyone else in the room. Like my daughter, this energetic, bundle of hopes and dreams, powered by imagination, creativity and prayer for a brighter tomorrow, would require a lot of love and support. Unlike my daughter, this new-fangled "IBM PC" could alter its temperament by simply pressing "abort, retry or ignore?"

Like most of the world, I was new to the world of computers. As a newspaper reporter for nearly a decade I had rare interactions with the algorithms of technology. In the late 70s, the last newspaper where I worked hooked up an ATEX publishing system connected to a minicomputer one weekend, and then announced that it would banish the sheets of newsprint coming out of our IBM Selectric typewriters and send our creative writings through cyberspace on the following Monday morning. This was met by newsroom staff with great fear —not to mention underwhelming cooperation. On that fateful Monday, subscribers were still looking for their morning paper when Walter Cronkite came on TV with the evening news.

I knew nothing about cyberspace when I was challenged during a brief period of unemployment by an ad in the San Francisco Chronicle that read "if you know how to write, we'll teach you about computers." I joined *Computer Systems News* — a trade journal for the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) market— in early 1981. I did not know what an OEM was — never mind the technology behind those electronic behemoths fed by reels of tape and magnetic cards. When I went to journalism school, there were no computer science courses, or instruction on how to translate engineering talk into English.

Fortunately, I was in an age where modern-day cave men who grew up building Heath kits in their basement were beginning to warm their imaginations to the idea of fire. How many rocks would have to be rubbed together to spark a flame? How could the flame be kept out of the wind? Most importantly, how many buffalo skins would it take to export the idea to a nearby village, and could I get someone to manage my collection of buffalo skins? This brave new world that began with an Intel-powered transistor radio during the Eisenhower administration had now developed into tiny buffalo chips that could sit on a desktop and devastate not only the typewriter industry, but its friends that supplied the much-needed correction fluid.

IBM was not the first to create a "personal computer" that would "click when it started, beep when you goofed and whirred when it stood still…" Elsewhere in Silicon Valley, in a Cupertino garage, the "Steves" (Jobs and Wozniak) had already come up with version 2e of the device that would appear in my daughter's pre-school class. Elsewhere, others had an idea for hardware and software that would make the PC seem prehistoric even then. But when IBM said "personal computer," the corporate world suddenly listened. It listened even more when a software company developed something called a "VisiCalc spreadsheet" that could blow the green caps off the accounting department.

When it came to learning technology, I often felt like a Von Trapp Child being taught the basics of the musical scale by Sister Maria. *Dough, the cash, the bottom line, ray a light blast just for fun….*The best part that I was not alone in my naiveté. In the wake of IBM's blessing, personal computers began to appear on desktops throughout the business world — and managers who once dictated to their assistants were learning how to hunt and peck on a keyboard. Meanwhile, corporate managers used to managing their air-conditioned behemoths at Information Services predicted that the little square box that beeped and burped and belched would only be a temporary distraction.