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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Sooner or Later, All Electronic Gadgets Will Converge Into a Single Gadget

By **VERLYN KLINKENBORG**

A couple of months ago I bought a utility jack. It lifts almost anything I can slip its nose under. It also clamps and winches, and that's all it does. Down at the barn, I have a tool shop full of single-purpose tools — pliers that can't be used as screwdrivers, logging chains that don't double as chain saws. I admire the stolid singleness of that utility jack — also that it needs no batteries, cannot be upgraded and won't play MP3's. It will become obsolete when gravity fails.

But elsewhere there is a different rule: everything that plugs in must converge. Once that wasn't the case. In the American household circa 1960 (and 1970 and 1980 and 1990), a telephone could not also be a walkie-talkie or a television or a camera or a record player or a radio or a photo album or an answering machine or an adding machine.

It certainly couldn't be a Web browser, because there was no such thing as the Web. Nor could it talk to the other electronic devices in the house or pinpoint your exact location or send e-mail or record voice notes or store addresses and phone numbers. And there was no chance that it could be all of those things simultaneously, and make calls as well.

These days, of course, the newest cellphones combine all of these functions. That makes it sound as though the trend is to choose one particularly handy, portable device — the cellphone — and steadily add more and more features as memory increases and chips shrink. But it's more complicated than that.

Every small electronic device is adding more and more features, which is to say more and more of the same features. An iPod is striking for being able to show movies. But so is a G.P.S. unit that transmits driving instructions over an FM radio and uses entries in your address book — uploaded from your cellphone via Bluetooth — to plot routes that may vary depending on traffic conditions updated by satellite based on real-time information from other drivers. There is no meaningful reason why the remote control for your new HDTV could not also place a phone call or tell your new washing machine to skip the spin cycle. Or, somehow, vice versa.

This means that many small, portable electronic devices are crowded with redundant functionality, which makes them more complicated and more expensive than they need to be. How many places

do you need to store your address book or play Tetris? But what feels like redundancy is in fact just a sign of incomplete convergence. The G.P.S. unit I want has a hard drive with more room for music files than a midsize iPod Nano. But I already carry an iPod, and I certainly don't want to listen to music over the G.P.S. unit's speakers or, for that matter, through an FM frequency on the radio. Nor do I want to watch a download of "Scrubs" or "Pirates of the Caribbean" or get my e-mail or balance my electronic checkbook on the screen of the G.P.S. Not yet, at least.

But before long, there will be a single slim rectangular device in which convergence is complete. What it is will depend on where it is and what it's near. We will have no idea what to call it, because none of its functions will have priority. Lose it, and you lose everything.

What all this convergence means may be a meaningless question, like what it will cost. But this is not just the convergence of many tools into one. It's also the convergence of a significant part of our reality into broad, intertwining strands of digitized data. That is an old prediction for the computer age — the way everything dissolves into information — but there is something new in watching so many different kinds of information receivers become one.

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