

Crossing the Digital Divide Volume 12

“When to turn what off”

by Joseph Feigon
for the Observer

When we refreshed our house and kitchen (translation: we transformed a tired old vacation home into a year-round residence) last year, and moved further away from major roadways, the reduction in man-made noise was quite significant. There’s a constant drone in most human enclaves: the mechanical and electronic infrastructure that enables high density living. It’s white noise, mostly.

Life in the country is anything but quiet, but the noise is organic. If we listen (or not), the white noise is wind rustling through the forest, or the rustle of a Crow’s feathers as she ambles easily between the Oaks. The constant babble of a creek (this time of year), the bark of a squirrel, or the whine of a border collie in need of some attention.

But our new refrigerator isn’t quiet. I hear/feel its low-level hum. The refrigerator works fine, the noise level isn’t noticed by most, but reminds me of the hum of a human settlement, and difficult to block out when I should be fast asleep.

Computers, wireless routers, DSL modems, satellite modems, battery backup, monitors, and printers all use power, most have fans, and all produce EMF’s (electromagnetic fields). EMF’s are both man-made and naturally occurring, some of which can be dangerous to living things, particularly in concentration over an extended period of time. Are we exposing ourselves to unnecessary health risks? EMF concentration is more noticeable near high-voltage power lines, cellphone towers and radio broadcast stations. The sun produces enormous amounts of EMF’s, a solar flare produces massive EMF’s, sometimes strong enough to disrupt digital communications (the Internet backbone includes many microwave links, another source of EMF).

The subject of EMF’s and potential health risks is beyond the scope of this article. There’s always some compromise to convenience, technology often teaches us lessons where it was least expected. For those concerned about reducing exposure to the radio frequencies common today: cellular, wifi, and microwave, a few guidelines to off-set the convenience with the potential risk:

- * If you use a cellphone, get a headset and use it
- * Limit/eliminate electronics from your bedroom and/or adjacent walls
- * Keep your appliances current (older refrigerators/freezers are big offenders)
- * Turn-off printers when not in use (many modern units are wifi ready)
- * Turn-off your routers and modems at night (use a power strip)
- * Use an Ethernet cable instead of Wifi for extended laptop use (disable wifi and bluetooth radios)

I’ll close this weeks’ column with a suggestion: your car or truck may be the biggest source of EMF’s you are exposed to. Most studies suggest EMF health risks are associated with extended periods of close proximity exposure (like a cellphone to ear). Given the relative low-

power of most wifi enabled devices, it is likely the health risks of digital convenience are as pronounced as our chances of winning the lottery.