

Crossing the Digital Divide (v96)

“obfuscate”

By Joseph Feigon for the Observer

Checksum, file size: JPEG, GIF, PNG, TIFF. Chat, email, and text, sent and received digital notes. Files and applications, operating systems and software updates, just when you thought you had it nailed, they change the way it works.

Young or mature, Mac or Windows, the world of technology baffles many. Confusion, and frustration, exasperation and desperation are all too common an experience. I hear all too often, “I just don’t get it.”

Fundamentally, the world of computers is all about mathematics. Pictures, word documents, spreadsheets, and digital music files are all commonly referred to as “flat files” in the world of information technology. A flat file may be nothing but text, or it may be a snapshot encoded as a jpg, or an email from your Aunt Betty. Flat files do NOT require specialized software to be read/seen. A picture (jpg, png, gif, tif, etc.) can be viewed with a number of applications, including Chrome, Firefox, Explorer, or Safari. A text document can be reviewed with notepad, text editor, Word, or Chrome/Firefox/ Explorer or Safari. The math that makes up each picture, document, spreadsheet or email message is the same. A “program” or “application” you use to view a picture, read a document, or compose an email has two basic functions: interpret the math and present in human readable format the arranged 1’s and 0’s that make up that file.

When Apple or Microsoft update their Operating Systems, they often “upgrade” many of the default applications they think best for viewing pictures, reading documents, or sending/receiving email. Why? Because. Alas, the new software applications, the change in ICONS, the new look and feel won’t change certain basics: your picture will still be in a Pictures folder, your documents will still be in Documents, and you *should* be able to read/create email with your email providers WEB interface. Remember, Apple Mail, Microsofts’ Outlook, and Open Source Thunderbird are email clients, software engineered to read/create an email. However an email is written, or read, email requires a “server”, which, in most cases, is in a data center managed by your Internet service provider, or an email provider like Yahoo, Google (gmail), Apple (iCloud), MGN, Hughes and many many more. Each and every major email SERVICE provider offers a web “client” to view/send/receive email. Most email providers consider their web interface “authoritative”, meaning, “if webmail works and your Mac/Windows email application doesn’t, the problem you may be experiencing is yours”. This is critical, and applies to iCloud, Outlook, Google, Yahoo, Hughes, Exede, WillitsOnline

and more. With so many applications (and versions of those applications) available to the end-user, service providers are ill-equipped to support every iteration of an application to do something – it's financially infeasible, and logistically impossible. Best to support and maintain an interface any computer user can use, e.g., web-based.

I'm not suggesting you use Safari to access your iCloud calendar and email, nor do I believe the Google suite (gmail, docs, sheets, drive, etc.) is an answer for everyone. What I am encouraging is that you become aware of the "cloud" based applications almost all service providers maintain to present their respective service to you that will not require Apple Mail or Outlook or Thunderbird, or Paint, or Photoshop be configured/setup. The web browser you use (Safari, Firefox, Chrome, Explorer, Edge, Opera, etc.) is a cloud-enabled application where no end-point configuration is required for you to use (other than your login credentials and an Internet connection). If you can use webmail, but Outlook doesn't work, you know Outlook needs configuration work. If you can view a picture with Explorer, you've learned you'll need to learn how to use the latest photo editor with Windows 10. Yes, it can be frustrating, but rest assured, your pictures (and documents) will still be there when you've learned the new program. And while you're at it, do a backup.

Control those things you can, and keep the surprises to a minimum!