

8th Storyworth: What inventions have had the biggest impact on your day-to-day life?

When I first read the question, I thought it asked for MY inventions – and I have a number of them, both with and without patents. But on further review, I realized it is a more generic question seeking my introspection and consideration of more than merely my own ideas. At the top of that list must be the personal automobile, which would include all the capabilities which enable a competent driver to conveniently and safely travel, because personal travel is the most enlightening experience one can have, and the personal automobile represents the ultimate embodiment of personal liberty in my mind. However, the engineer in me COULD go down a shopping list of developments which led to the capabilities in autos which pre-date the autonomous vehicle genre, which I personally see as a less than optimum solution as I have noted elsewhere ;-)

Some key concepts therein, however, are worthy of mention, because of their specific impact on my personal safety, reliability, and functionality. Some simple examples would be safety glass, which breaks into pebble-like shards instead of tearing people's faces to shreds; disk brakes, which better cool, and sling moisture off the disk, thereby adding braking capability; ABS, which allows even newbies to stop close to that of professionals; and electric starters which allow us all to barely think about when we originally had to crank engines over.

As well, it takes no genius to look at the way we receive entertainment, so telecommunications is in the list, and specifically includes TV and the internet, which also means the personal computer. Considering how little time has expired between the initial conception of the ENIAC, before which only mechanical computers existed, and today's sophisticated computers on a chip, so cheap they are given away in toys, and are included in everything from your doorbell to your vacuum, to see their impact has been incredibly far reaching.

I suppose from a convenience standpoint I would have to include the Microwave Oven. I cannot imagine my diet being remotely as diverse without it ;-). However, I think most people who actually consider such things would have to say that sanitation and indoor plumbing were real game changers, especially from a public health perspective. I would personally include with those the development of vaccines for the host of things we so take for granted today, but which were killing people of my parent's generation, like smallpox and polio. So modern medicine, which is a far more complicated set of developments than I could possibly list here, must be close to the top of the list; I might not be around had they NOT been developed.

On a personal experience basis, I would have to include "The Pill". As the first generation to have it widely available, we can hardly conceive the differences in our society it brought about; from expanding the ability of women to control their own bodies while enabling their lovers to relax and enjoy, to controlling the runaway population growth which might otherwise have led to even more armed conflict. Ancillary to those have to be the ability of women to better self-actualize, and men to better plan for families once they were ready, which led to career development and added higher education, which has included some downsides like student debt and a lack of skilled trades-people, with the odd effects that has had on society.

If one traces back far enough, it is easily seen that the development of the Bessemer Process for making steel allowed the scaling up needed for making the world as we know it today, which also depended upon that process to develop the logistical capability to transport goods and services, and the knowledge that engendered, across continents. Add the development of light aluminum and composite materials, as well as their scaling production, and one can see a clear demarcation point between craftsmen's unique production and Whitney's interchangeable parts leading to the mass consumerism which is our economy today. Materials science also enabled buildings to exceed five stories, and the huge energy sector which seems to have an insatiable demand which might in the long run kill us. Or, more likely, spur the development of precisely what might instead save our environment, just as those two have balanced over time.

If I trace back further in time, I would have to credit Gutenberg, and the Chinese, with the technologies to provide information which could educate the masses. While most people probably read dime store novels, enough of us read instead technical manuals, with a constant mindset toward ways to improve EVERYTHING, and a constant questioning of ALL dogma, which includes religion, one of the WORST inventions of mankind, NOT because it gives people HOPE, which is valuable, but because it removes from SOME the need for their own rationality, thereby enabling their being duped like the sheep they can be. I pray to avoid that ;-)

Considering the long documented history of man walking this planet, it is incredible to realize how many things we take for granted which never existed as little as fifty years ago. That is a large part of why I suggest that, for me, today is the ideal time for my existence. I suppose also included in my list of “things I could not do without” would be the double-edged sword of TV. When I look at the cost today for a very advanced LCD TV, and compare it to that of an old B&W tube type, it is hard to imagine that a “thrift store” has any analog TV for sale at ALL, since the cost for a converter box to be able to watch even an over-the-air show costs almost what a new digital TV costs. But that is the point for most of electronics. Moore’s law, which I first heard when Microsoft was selling DOS, has proven to be pretty accurate, at 18 months to double performance, while halving price. It is as true for a TV as for a PC, but has made the CONTENT a little weird, especially the means by which you can GET that content. Consider the fact of Cable TV, which is today one of the dumbest purchases you can make even though only five years ago it was the ONLY way to see local TV from as little as 30 miles from the source of those programs. Far better now is streaming, even as the marketplace for trying to figure out the monetizing of it has gotten crazy. But that is why the analog TV of old HAD to be replaced with digital; because there is only so much bandwidth, or spectrum (and the irony of THAT is not lost on me ;-)) is only so big and can never be bigger. But then, necessity was never the real mother of invention ;-)

My daily life is also affected by the “democratization” of the global marketplace. Not many years ago it was impossible to have any equity in the economics which is the basis for our economy; capitalism, except by your own creation of a company, unless you were willing to pay middlemen. Today’s markets exist in most of the world’s bigger cities, and the technology has enabled the cost to become literally FREE to participate. So I spend at least an hour daily monitoring, and have even recently started actively trading, because the only downside to the trade is the risk of value turning south. As I have noted before, few things exist without their precursor technologies having been developed. So my access to internet and computer, with all the software associated with those, has enabled me to see trends and take advantage of them on even a short term basis, such as buying shares just before their dividend activity, which is usually a quarterly event for most, but if timed right can have a pretty good chance of generating cash flow from seemingly nothing at all except the associated market volatility, by using Limit Orders for both buying and selling. Then it is really just a matter of timing.

And if I do that badly, there is always brewing, which has existed for centuries, and which will generate the beer I can cry into, as long as someone made the cups or bowls I’ll need to hold it. Come to think of it, I suppose that the first person who made food was the most important to my daily existence of all. The HARD part is knowing when enough actually IS enough ;-)

Joe Holzer 2/16/2021