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The New Yorker Book of Technology Cartoons

Robert Mankoff, editor
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Some people love technology and some hate it, but nearly everyone seems at least a little bit afraid of it-afraid of being enslaved by machines that neither sleep nor eat and seemingly know more than humans do. This collection by The New Yorker's cartoonist corps is a wry, often hilarious commentary on the extent to which technology pervades and dominates individual lives and the modern world at large.

Like the rest of society, the half-dozen artist contributors have differing outlooks on high tech. Mankoff, author of the introduction, is an unabashed technophile. "Actually, it's more complicated than that," he explains. "I love it when it works and I hate it when it doesn't." Fine, but what happens when it works too well? In an introductory self-portrait, Charles Barsotti answers the question by drawing himself being pursued by a computer with devil's horns, fangs and tail, poised to hurl a lightning bolt. Cute, but sobering; the personal computer as Frankenstein's monster. Marisa Acocella caricatures herself, beleaguered and weary, gazing upward at a notice on her forehead reading "Drive space full"-a reference to another of technology's unintended consequences: information overload.

Finally, the cartoons. One portrays three bloodhounds in the woods, straining at their leashes, gazing at a laptop computer on the ground. "First, they do an on-line search," one cop explains to another. Then it's on to two kids operating what would appear a sidewalk lemonade stand, but for the sign: "Billy & Jimmy's Technology Stocks-25 cents a share." Here's a woman telling her husband, "You can access me by saying simply 'Agnes.' It is not necessary to add 'dot-com.'" A man in a kitchen snaps at his microwave: "No, I don't want to play chess. I just want you to reheat the lasagna." At a funeral, two befuddled mourners crane their necks toward the coffin: "It must be his beeper," one says. Then comes a wedding at which the minister, tiny video camera perched atop his head, intones: "If there is anyone who objects to this union, either here or on the Internet, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Silly? Wildly exaggerated? Sure, but the underlying points are serious and unmistakable, always the case with good political and social humor. This collection is highly recommended for anyone struggling to stay afloat in the rising tide of high tech. It may not ease all those jitters, but should remind the reader not to take technology too seriously-even if it does rule the universe.

JOHN FLESHER (November / December 2000)

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