(Approx. 1521 words)

Without a Manual, Can Understanding be Automatic?

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Not long ago, writing was the primary format for human knowledge. Once we graduated from cave drawings to the written word, our knowledge was stored this way. Information was preserved and passed on through writing, from stone tablets to books. Though a picture may be "worth a thousand words," it often needs some explanation. Libraries were the repositories of knowledge from ancient times through just recently. Now the Internet and the World Wide Web are vying for that position.

While stone tablets have lasted for many thousands of years, and printed books have been around for a little over a thousand years; the Internet has existed for only about 50 years, and the World Wide Web for a little over 30 (the Web is a service that runs on the Internet). It has been estimated that all the books ever printed would be equivalent to about 175 terabytes of storage; that is only 175 of those one-TB hard drives you probably have. In contrast, the amount of data estimated to be on the Internet in 2022 is 94 zettabytes (an unimaginable 94 x 10^10 one TB hard drives). We are generating more data than we know what to do with. It is believed that 90% of the world's data was developed in the last two years.

Product user manuals used to be actual printed books, but now they are migrating to the Web. In the best case, the manual is a pdf. In most cases, however, the only product information is web pages, separate articles, and user forums. The printed manual for many products consists only of some basic connection and power-up directions, along with a web link to additional information. Sometimes the manual information is built into a help menu in the product.

A few types of products remain where detailed paper user manuals are still usually provided; automobiles are one example. However, the manual is very limited or nonexistent for many of our most complex high-tech products. Computers, televisions, cell phones, and most software have little or nothing for user manuals. Since those hardware products heavily depend on software, I guess it is unsurprising. Since software and software-based products can be easily updated and changed, making a detailed manual would be like aiming at a moving target. For particularly complicated and widely used products, sometimes third-party vendors provide manuals confused users can purchase (the "for Dummies" series, for example).

What is a Windows 11 user to do with a question or problem? Do they go to the Microsoft website to search for answers? Do they turn to a search engine and comb the Web for help? Do they turn to friends, family, or the tech guru they hopefully know to get advice on their problems? Do they look for a product forum online for answers? Do they join a user group? Do they simply figure things out by trial and error? Do they just remain frustrated?

Today's tech products are too unfamiliar, complicated, and unsupported for many seniors. For example, the smartphone is probably the most complex consumer product ever made for its size and weight.

Even when put into the hands of someone familiar with the concept and use of a conventional telephone, its menus and features can be overwhelming. In the last year of his life, my 85-year-old father went through several cell phones and smartphones (some "senior-friendly"), looking for one he could understand and use. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in his search. He was not technology-challenged; my father had used and even built computers for many years. He was losing his tech edge with age but struggled to learn a new tech tool. While it is a device that young children can often pick up and use (at least in some way), he could never utilize a smartphone to his satisfaction.

Even I feel behind the curve on smartphone knowledge. I am sometimes frustrated with my limited understanding of the features and capabilities and the lack of documentation. I admit I wasn't an early adopter of smartphones as I thought they were too expensive. I still feel that way, but I now appreciate their importance in our society. I used my first smartphone, a Samsung Galaxy J3, for five years and have had my second, a Samsung S22, for almost a year. I thought I knew something about using smartphones until I got my new one. While from the same manufacturer and using the same OS (Android), the new instrument and the new OS version were sufficiently different to require some relearning. And, of course, there was no user manual to help guide me.

The lack of standardization in products does not help in understanding products. For example, my old phone had four hard buttons, while my new one has only three. A lot of the basics of operation were the same, but one of the first problems I had with my new phone was shutting it off. On my old phone, holding the power button (the unpaired side button) would bring up the phone's power-down menu. On my new phone, doing the same brought up Samsung's Bixby app (a voice-activated assistant similar to Google Assistant). I finally figured out that I had to simultaneously press and hold the power and volume down buttons to get the power-down menu on my new phone.

I have learned some new phone tricks for my Samsung S22, but they were difficult to figure out. I imagine every software developer believes the features they add to a product are "intuitive" and don't need any explanation or directions. Unfortunately, intuition does not seem standardized in humans; what is obvious to one person may not be to another. A good friend with the same S22 phone showed me a neat capability in the new Android version – the ability to nest icons in icons. Instead of having all apps represented by icons at the same screen level, he showed me that I could create a Home Control icon and put all my home control app icons into it (like a folder on the screen for grouping icons). It is a good feature, but now I can't remember how to do it again (and I have no manual to refer to). It does not seem as intuitive as when he first showed me.

I paid my friend back by showing him a new feature he did not know about. I don't recall where I found it, but if you double-press the power button, it brings up the phone camera (and bypasses the PIN entry). This is handy if you need to take a quick photo with the phone. Another new feature I found is that a quick double tap on the screen will soft start the phone (the same as a quick press of the power button).

There are some things I have not figured out, and so far, I've not found the answers on the Web. For example, in some Samsung TV commercials, phone users were shown taking selfies using Google Assistant ("Hey Google, take a selfie"). I tried this at the time (a month ago) and was successful. Unfortunately, now this no longer appears to work for me. I did get a recent Android update, which could have changed things. My web searches give various instructions for doing this, but none seem to work for my phone now. What I'd give for a manual (that is, of course, accurate and complete).

More Inconsistencies

Whenever there is more than one way to do something, there will be a different opinion on how it should be done. One example of this is the low battery charge indicator on a product. I have three different products, each indicating battery charge with a single LED indicator differently.

My old Philips Norelco rechargeable electric razor has a single LED to indicate battery charging status. When the charging cord is first plugged in, the LED turns on solid to show the battery is charging. When the razor's battery reaches a full charge, the LED switches to flashing. My Cygolite rechargeable rear bike light has a single red LED that can flash in various patterns to indicate my presence to cars approaching behind me. When the charging cable is plugged into it, the LED flashes low to indicate the battery is charging. When the battery reaches full, the LED switches to a low-intensity solid.

My Wyze Night Lights have a single LED to indicate battery status. When the charging cord is first plugged in, the LED turns on solid to show the battery is charging. The LED switches off when the Wyze light's battery reaches full charge.

Each of these charging indicator methods is valid, but with the razor and the bike light, I can never remember which situation indicates a full charge. When I come back a few hours later, I'm typically scratching my head, wondering if flashing means fully charged or still charging. The Wyze method seems the least ambiguous. Why can't everyone do the same?