Things vs. the Internet

A friend told me the other day about a cartoon she had seen. A husband was holding out his wife's coat and telling her, "We'll have to eat out. The refrigerator isn't talking to the stove." And so it goes in the world of the Internet of Things. Of course, they really don't have to go out to eat. They could go online to GrubHub and order in. Although if the security equipment at their domicile were also on the fritz, that might mean real trouble for the delivery guy.

Promises of a brave new world where "things" obey our friend the internet on our behalf may abound, but I don't think things are going to go quietly. Remember the last time you "lost" the salt shaker, or nail scissors, or a bottle-top remover? Remember how you knew exactly where it was just a minute ago, right from where it had now disappeared. Remember how you hollered, all red-faced, and it suddenly reappeared. Or, even better, remember how you went to Amazon and ordered a new one and then—and only then—did it reappear. That's the way of things. Inanimate objects like to feel needed. For a time, they may believe that being "internet-ed up" confirms their importance in the lives of their owners. But what happens when they get to thinking that this attention is rather impersonal, that only the internet—another slightly less inanimate object—respects the roles they play? Insurrection? The Revolt of Things? Who can say?

The Revolt Begins

The problem of living in this new superdigital, superconvenient world of ours is the dependence on the devices underlying it and on the devices inside the devices. The other day, I purchased the new Amazon Fire TV, a little square device accompanied by a little rectangular remote control that opens up streaming media movies and television and games and whatall on my HDTV. Amazon is especially proud of the output selection feature, namely, super user-friendly voice search. So I paid the $99 for the device, having already formed the habit of paying $99 a year for the Amazon Prime service that you need with it. After a couple of days, a techie neighbor dropped by to help me install it, since I am rather hardware-phobic. At least I didn't have to spend more bucks hiring a techie, but I guess that was always a possibility. The device hooked up easily, the remote worked, the voice search had no problems helping me build my new "Watchlist," and—bingo!—I was my own network programmer. No longer the slave of cable channel management decisions! No more getting stuck watching shows with commercials or watching them delayed with a finger on the fast-forward button!

One hour later, the voice search went out. And the backup text search Amazon had developed did not even have the convenience of a squared-off screen with letters grouped conveniently. Instead, it had one long line from A to Z. I'm not even sure it had a space button. So if you wanted Harrison Ford, you had to go through John Ford, a movie about Henry Ford, and car descriptions for all I know. Within the week, the whole device had gone out. The week after that, my neighbor came back to help. Turns out, the device just needed to be reset—unplug, replug. (I know, I know. I could have done that. But the only thing more angst-inducing than a new piece of hardware is a new piece of hardware that's having problems.) His fiddling with the remote took a little longer. Turns out that Amazon had apparently used the world's cheapest batteries. My techie neighbor doesn't trust Brand X batteries on principle and installed respectable ones (Duracell). Ta-da! Back comes voice search.

I finally got around to actually watching a movie in all its crisp HDTV splendor. It was a James Bond movie called *Skyfall*, released during the celebration of the series' 50th year, and it was great. Boom, di, di, boom, da, da, da, boom …

More Power to Us

Batteries! The curse of the Internet of Things. Will someone tell me why I have to recharge my Apple iPad before I've finished one long book? Its screen is so sensitive to my fingers, why can't it recharge itself using solar power or just overhead light? Why doesn't it warn me when the battery is getting low, maybe as part of the shutdown ritual? And I don't mean waiting until its last gasp, but just advising me. And how come the battery charging is so slow? Why should it take hours to recharge? Why can't I just stick it into the charger and re-juice it lickety split? All right, all right. Quick recharging might conk out the delicate device, emergency-level recharging might require rewiring of buildings all over the country, and only nuclear power plants could support the power demands. Excuses, excuses!

There are dangers, of course. Just think of what might happen to post-Millennium children after a lifetime of living encased in Wi-Fi rays. Not to mention the people who have phones to their ears day after day. But if we're going to Internet our Things, we're going to have to adjust. Our devices may be inanimate, but that doesn't mean they don't demand a lot of TLC.

Barbara Quint is senior editor of *Online Searcher*. Her email address is bquint@mindspring.com. Send your comments about this column to itletters@infotoday.com.
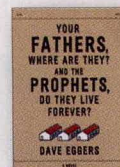
Big Books at BEA

At BookExpo America (BEA) 2014, hundreds of authors and exhibitors gathered in the Javits Center in New York to show off a truly impressive amount of books. With an eye toward summer beach reading or acquisitions for the library, here are some of the most talked-about new books to hit BEA this year.
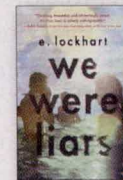
We Were Liars
by E. Lockhart
This young adult novel focuses on the dysfunctional family drama arising from a mysterious accident at a well-to-do family retreat.

Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?
by Dave Eggers
The indefatigable Eggers follows up his best-selling 2013 novel *The Circle* with the story of a man struggling to make sense of his country.

Finding Me
by Michelle Knight with Michelle Burford
Told by the first victim of Cleveland kidnapper Ariel Castro, *Finding Me* is the harrowing story of Michelle Knight's abduction and her escape more than a decade later in 2013.
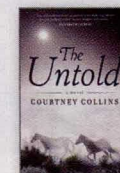
Let's Get Lost
by Adi Alsaid
Alsaid's debut novel tells a story about love, loss, and finding yourself as four people set off together on a cross-country road trip with only one thing in common.

Privacy in the Age of Big Data
by Theresa M. Payton and Theodore Claypoole
Payton and Claypoole highlight the pros and cons of Big Data collection and illuminate the many areas of data collection that are still largely unknown to the general public.

The Untold
by Courtney Collins
The Untold is the author's debut novel, which takes place in the Australian outback and tells the story of a horse thief as she tries to escape her pursuers.