

Reboot successful

Richard Barr receives a panic report involving some dead beef



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Solicitors do not spontaneously shut down from time to time

Eighteen months ago, I wrote what I thought was to be the very last article in the very last Solicitors Journal – ever. I wrote sadly about my long relationship with the Journal that had lasted for a quarter of its 160-year lifespan. I likened it to the love affair with a bookshop described by Helene Hanff in 84 Charing Cross Road.

In the months between, I spent some nostalgic time thinning out years of old bank statements, invoices, forgotten love letters (not many) and some correspondence with famous people who are now dead including original letters from John F Kennedy, John Profumo and even Helene Hanff, with whom I shared a brief correspondence after telling her how much I liked her book. Sadly, no book will come out of any of these exchanges.

But I am undeterred, for I have been having a lively correspondence – albeit at the moment one-sided – with Apple Computers.

I own a five-year-old Apple Mac. For four of those five years it has served me reasonably well and, within the confines of modern technology, it has been no more annoying than any other computer I have used.

Then I answered the siren song of an upgrade to an operating system named after a different mountain, and it all changed. Regularly and without warning the screen goes black and everything that I have been working on disappears, forcing me to sit and wait while a thin line is drawn across the middle of the screen, followed by that annoying coloured disk that rotates and rotates and rotates while the computer is going through the digital equivalent of sipping coffee and having a cigarette.

Then when it is up and running it displays a little message up saying something like:

“Your computer was restarted because of a problem. Click to send a report to Apple”.

The error message following each shut down is always a “panic report” – no stiff upper lips are programmed into these machines, just digital headless chickens – attended by computer speak in incomprehensible letters and digits, and an obscure reference to dead beef.

Over the past months I have been responding copiously to these problem reports, hoping to receive some feedback from the Big Apple himself. Here is a taster:

22 August: *Problem? What problem? There is no problem round here. The electricity is on. It is good reliable Norfolk electricity. The room is warm. No one is teasing the computer, nor has the cat peed on it.*

11 September. *I just took the dogs out for a walk, having set the computer to back up a large folder. How did it know that it could sneak in a restart just because I left the room? Clearly you are using the camera again. I have now put a post-it note on the lens to stop your prying.*

23 November. *Do you ever read these comments or is there some clever algorithm that picks up standard words and grades me as a nutter from level 1-10? Here are some words to confuse your software: chrysanthemum, Bognor Regis, pterodactyl, numerology and the rule in Rylands v Fletcher.*

My messages have fallen on deaf megabytes.

Modern technology is wonderful. It will transform our lives, say the technocrats. It will do away with the need for paper, they say. It will, they also say, eventually reduce or remove the need for car drivers, airline pilots, doctors, and heaven forbid, solicitors.

But there is something missing in these optimistic predictions. Solicitors, doctors, airline pilots and, unfortunately, politicians do not spontaneously shut down from time to time, or, if they do, they seldom reboot without a considerable amount of external effort.

Clearly instead of bemoaning these shut downs I should rejoice because so long as computers remain unreliable, we mere non-digital mortals will not be at serious risk of being supplanted by machines. I will have more to say about the interface between us and modern technology, so keep watching this space.

Much more importantly, while we are in the mood to rejoice, I am so pleased that the Solicitors Journal has been rebooted successfully and I wish it and all who write in it at least another 160 years before it encounters any further problem and has to shut down again. **S**

