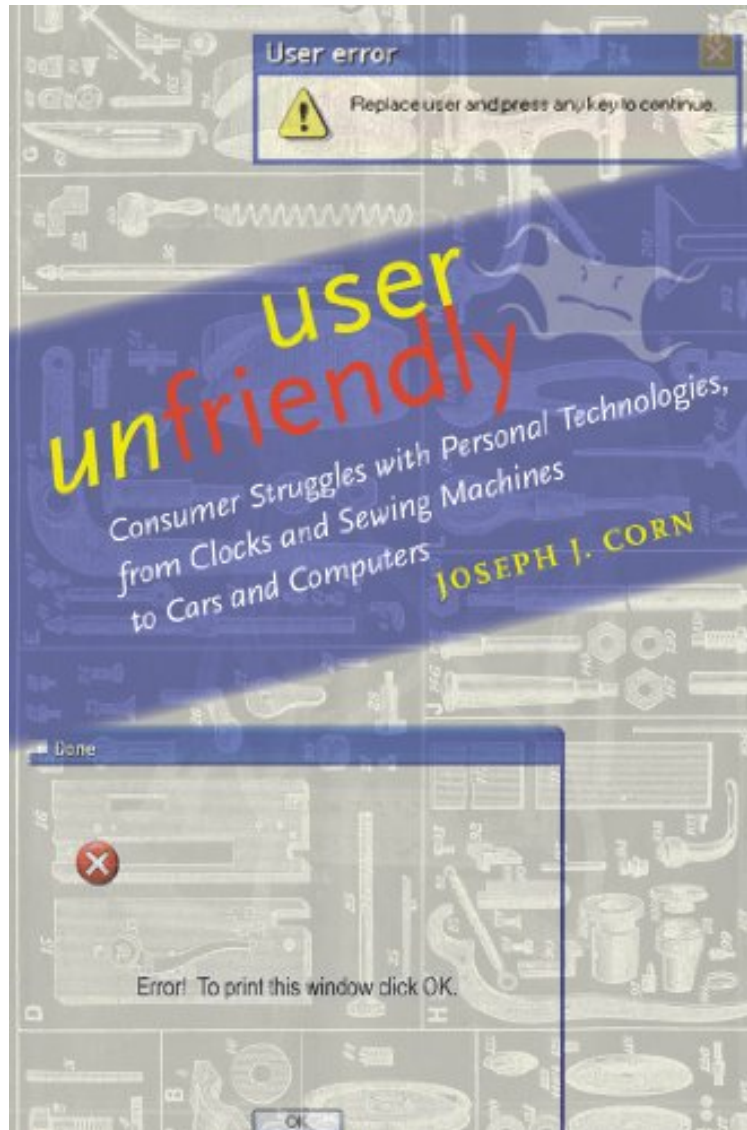


(Ebook pdf) User Unfriendly: Consumer Struggles with Personal Technologies, from Clocks and Sewing Machines to Cars and Computers

# User Unfriendly: Consumer Struggles with Personal Technologies, from Clocks and Sewing Machines to Cars and Computers

Joseph J. Corn

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**Joseph J. Corn : User Unfriendly: Consumer Struggles with Personal Technologies, from Clocks and Sewing Machines to Cars and Computers** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised User Unfriendly: Consumer Struggles with Personal Technologies, from Clocks and Sewing Machines to Cars and Computers:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A Wonderful Account of an Important PhenomenonBy Bill YoungsI

am very impressed with Joseph Corn's discussion of what he calls our "Marvelous and Maddening Machines." I actually feel uplifted by reading it, as in the presence a great piece of music. This is a solid work of analysis and explication. What I especially like about *User Unfriendly* is the fact that Corn has identified an important but little discussed facet of what it is to be human: we invent things and then we struggle to learn how to use the very things we have invented. Corn argues that in the past new technologies evolved incrementally from what was familiar, and so the innovation and the challenge of learning it were not particularly difficult. But now something significant and new is going on in the process of our creating and learning (or trying to learn) new technologies. This is one of those arguments that seems obvious once you state it, but that sense of the obvious is accompanied by the thought, "Oh, yes, how true--but I never thought of that before." Corn describes this "marvelous and maddening" phenomenon as it unfolded in various technologies over the course of the past two centuries. He begins with the challenge inherent in learning to use clocks and sewing machines during the nineteenth century and then moves to automobiles, a topic that occupies roughly half of the book. Cars that are now, on the whole, user friendly were once a consumer challenge that we can hardly fathom today. Corn takes us back to complex problems a century ago in purchasing, running, and trouble-shooting an automobile, and he shows us a world in which owners were expected, for example, to oil various parts of their machines as often as once every two hundred miles. All of this brings us to the modern world and the user unfriendliness of computers. Reading about the first personal computers, one can be grateful to be living about three decades after those initial years of those maddening machines. But Corn reminds us that the story of innovation and frustration is far from over. Modern life has brought not only the challenge of mastering computers, but also the frustrations provided by computerized products such as digital watches. He concludes, "we are wholly dependent on these devices....Even if they offer us far more options than we need and are user unfriendly, we have little choice; we stay on the technology treadmill." *User Unfriendly* is beautifully written with fascinating anecdotes about the technological worlds of the past, and it is seasoned with appealing stories of the author's own struggles with new technologies. It is authoritative and well researched, drawing for example, on scores of old user manuals for computers and automobiles. Clearly written, cogently argued, intelligent throughout, *User Unfriendly* is an admirably friendly and accessible discussion of an important topic in our individual lives and the life of humanity.

We've all been there. Seduced by the sleek designs and smart capabilities of the newest gadgets, we end up stumped by their complicated set-up instructions and exasperating error messages. In this fascinating history, Joseph J. Corn maps two centuries of consumer frustration and struggle with personal technologies. Aggravation with the new machines people adopt and live with is as old as the industrial revolution. Clocks, sewing machines, cameras, lawn mowers, bicycles, electric lights, cars, and computers: all can empower and exhilarate, but they can also exact a form of servitude. Adopters puzzle over which type and model to buy and then how to operate the device, diagnose its troubles, and meet its insatiable appetite for accessories, replacement parts, or upgrades. It intrigues Corn that we put up with the frustrations our technology thrusts upon us, battling with the unfamiliar and climbing the steep learning curves. It is this ongoing struggle, more than the uses to which we ultimately put our machines, that animates this thought-provoking study. Having extensively researched owner's manuals, computer user-group newsletters, and how-to literature, Corn brings a fresh, consumer-oriented approach to the history of technology. *User Unfriendly* will be valuable to historians of technology, students of American culture, and anyone interested in our modern dependence on machines and gadgets.

"A thoughtful, even profound meditation on the relationship of technology and culture." (Robert C. Post, National Museum of American History)"The author examines the barriers that customers have faced in adopting personal technologies, including product unfamiliarity, nonintuitive instructions, lack of service or support, unavailability of replacement parts, and technological and planned obsolescence... A useful acquisition for consumer studies and history of technology collections." (Choice)"An excellent introduction to the ways technology has been used in the domestic sphere." (Lawrence B. Glickman *Journal of American History*)"A must read for historians of technology. Corn's thoughtful engagement of the historiography, inclusion of interdisciplinary scholarship, and close readings of the sources change what we know not simply about these individual machines, but about the process of technology consumption." (Kathleen Franz *Technology and Culture*)"Joseph Corn's book is a much needed addition to the literature of the history of consumer technology." (A. David Wunsch *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*)About the AuthorJoseph J. Corn is a senior lecturer emeritus in the history department at Stanford University, author of *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation*, and coauthor of *Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future*, both also published by Johns Hopkins.